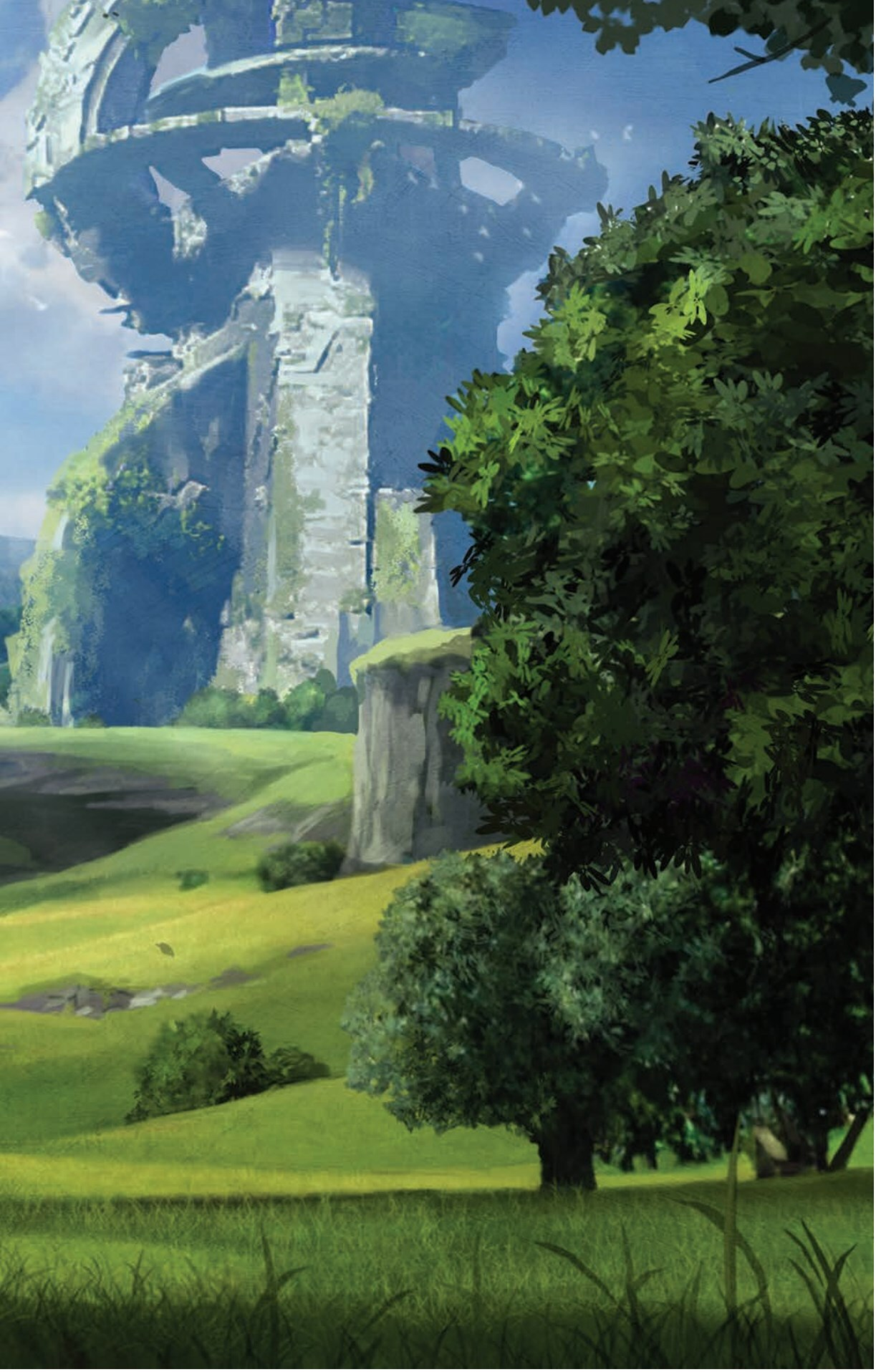
GAMEINFORMER

SONIC FRONTIERS



↘

From our cover story:

This gorgeous concept art, provided by Sega and Sonic Team, depicts the new "open-zone" direction of the franchise. Read more about the promising Sonic Frontiers (and the road Sega took to get here) in our massive cover story on page 20.

Developed by Sonic Team

Published by Sega

EDITOR'S NOTE

ONE NEW GAME A GENERATION

GRAND THEFT AUTO V CONTINUES TO SELL AT A BLISTERING PACE. With 160 million units sold since its initial 2013 release, it's one of gaming's greatest successes, still played by millions of people every day and selling better than most new releases. Even though it's likely in development, I doubt we'll see the next Grand Theft Auto game soon.

At this rate, we'll be lucky to get one new Rockstar game a generation. Red Dead Redemption II is on a similar trajectory to GTA V, with over 43 million units sold. Rockstar's formula of delivering a sprawling story-driven single-player campaign backed by an ever-growing online experience works, but it's also disappointing given the studio's history.

On PlayStation 2, Rockstar launched three mainline Grand Theft Auto and Midnight Club games and two Manhunt and Smuggler's Run games. It also released Bully, The Warriors, ported the first Max Payne, and published its sequel. That happened within eight years – and isn't even close to the company's entire catalog from the time. The PlayStation 3 generation is similar, though not quite as prolific. I bet the sales of all these games combined don't touch GTA V's numbers. Again, Rockstar found a formula that works, but I can't help thinking the game industry went wrong.

Triple-A game development is a different beast than it was on PlayStation 2. Development teams are far larger and require more time. These investments have made publishers wary of taking too many risks, as one flop could sink a studio. That wasn't the case in the 2000s; a hit like Grand Theft Auto could fuel an experiment like Manhunt or Bully.

Most publishers stick to what they believe is a sure bet, and I can't fault them for that. However, it won't stop me from complaining that we used to get a new Grand Theft Auto every one to two years. Triple-A, single-player games are starting to look like dinosaurs. We see fewer of these juggernauts each year, despite being some of the biggest sellers. Sony and Nintendo continue releasing them at a nice clip, but a lot of publishers are eyeing the Rockstar model. Ubisoft's forthcoming Assassin's Creed Infinity is an ongoing, live-service game. We've seen what's happened to Call of Duty, which has a single-player campaign, but with significantly more focus going to the live service offshoot.

Rumors of the next GTA will continue swirling, but as long as GTA V continues to attract new players – moving another five million units in the early months of this year – San Andreas will likely be our home.

ANDREW REINER
Editor-In-Chief

WHAT I'M PLAYING
Fortnite, Citizen Sleeper, Tiny Tina's Wonderlands

WHAT I'M WATCHING
Stranger Things, *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, *Evil*

WHAT I'M READING
Dark Crisis, *Amazing Spider-Man*, *X-Men Red*

WHAT I'M COLLECTING
Star Wars: Black Series, Mattel's Jurassic World: Dominion

GAMEINFORMER
SONIC FRONTIERS

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FUNCO: The Best Way to Increase Your Video Game Library!

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SONIC FRONTIERS

To celebrate Sonic's triumphant return to the cover of *Game Informer* (the first time since Sonic & Knuckles in 1994), Sega and *GI* worked with artist Evan Stanley, a Pacific Northwest illustrator and writer perhaps best known for her work on the *Sonic the Hedgehog* comics for both Archie and IDW. The main cover (1) depicts the new "open-zone" design of Sonic Frontiers and features one of Sonic's new moves, Cyloop, while the *Game Informer* Gold collectable cover (2) pays loving homage to *Game Informer* Issue #1 (3), which featured the Blue Blur on its cover.

GAMEINFORMER

Volume XXXII / Number 6 / Issue 347

Editor-in-Chief
Andrew Reiner

Magazine Content Director
Matt Miller

Online Content Director
Brian Shea
Built a mini-arcade in his basement during the pandemic

Features Editor
Kimberley Wallace

Senior Associate Editor
Blake Hester

Associate Editors
John Carson
Jill Grodt
Jason Guisao
Wesley LeBlanc
Marcus Stewart
Accidentally shoulder-checked Mark Cerny at an E3

Video Editors
Alex Stadnik
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Creative Director
Jeff Akervik
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Production Director
Margaret Andrews
Believes Mission: Impossible II is not the worst one

Senior Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin
Their personal style is best described as "Punky Muppet"

Graphic Designer
Mónica Rexach Ortiz

Web Designers/Programmers
Kristin Williams
Jon Woodey

Office Manager
Sarah Hansen

Advertising Manager
Janey Stringer

Marketing Coordinator
Rachel Castle

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with the print edition to follow

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Web: **gamestop.com/faq**

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For subscription inquiry only:
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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Matt Miller

Magazine Content Director

Gaming culture has a bias toward the new. We celebrate the dream of the next big thing, which makes sense. Gaming is an art form and discipline still in its relative infancy, so there's good reason to always look to the next horizon of tech and design. But the longer I'm part of the hobby, the more I realize the value of digging into the past for my next playthrough. Inevitably, my tastes change, I embrace new genres, and the legacy of a developer's previous work captures my attention. Even as I enjoy the excitement of the next big thing, I increasingly find value in looking back and rediscovering what I missed the first time around.

Kimberley Wallace

Features Editor

Ending an RPG is a bittersweet experience for me. It's hard to leave a world I've become comfortable in – with characters I've come to know and battle systems I've mastered. The time investment is that important. I love the accomplishment of seeing the credits roll, but I always pause at the final mission and wonder, "Have I done everything I wanted to do?" "Am I ready to leave this all behind?" Then I remind myself that I'm walking away with cherished memories, and there's always a new adventure waiting.

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They might not seem as novel as they once were, but that's only because, in 2022, indie games are everywhere – and the game industry is better for it. We provide an in-depth look at the small experiences you can play across every platform.

20 COVER STORY – SONIC FRONTIERS

Sonic the Hedgehog is back in a big way. We played Sega's open-world take on the blue blur and talked to the development team at length. Get the inside scoop on Sonic's next 3D adventure in our 16-page cover story.

36 OPEN ROADS

Fulbright's Open Roads debut trailer impressed, but news quickly spread of the team's behind-the-scenes struggles with a hostile work environment. Discover how a small group banded together to finish their road trip and renew interest in the game.

48 MADDEN NFL 23

After the series slipped to one of its lowest points critically, EA hit the drawing board, ready to bring the Madden series to its former glory. We visited the development team in Orlando and got hands-on with the game. Here's what to expect the next time you hit the field.

78 IN SEARCH OF PERFECT

In 2012, Derek Yu released Spelunky, a game about exploring a cave. Since then, it's become known as a "perfect" game. But what does that mean? We flew out to California to ask – all the while exploring real caves and getting in harm's way.

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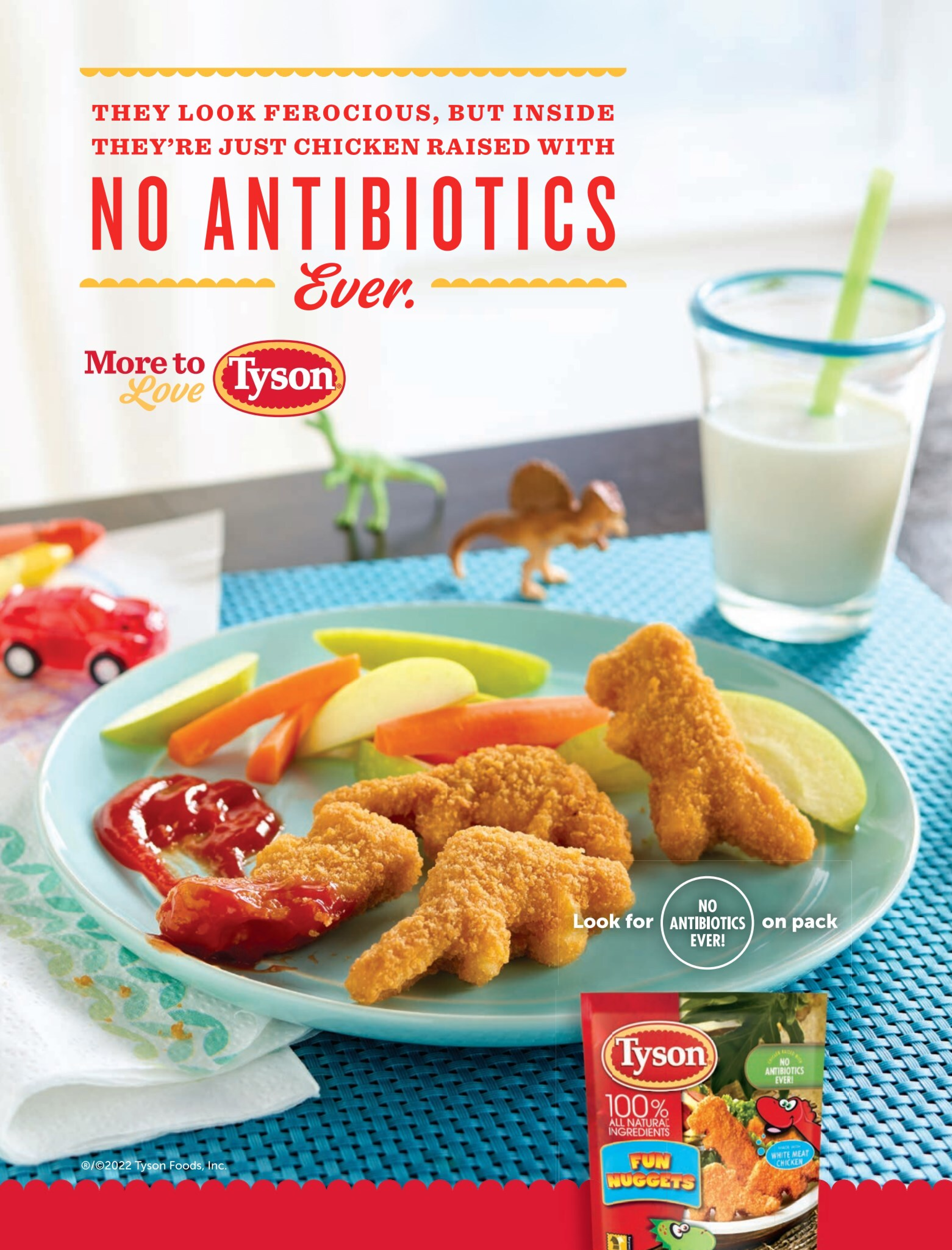
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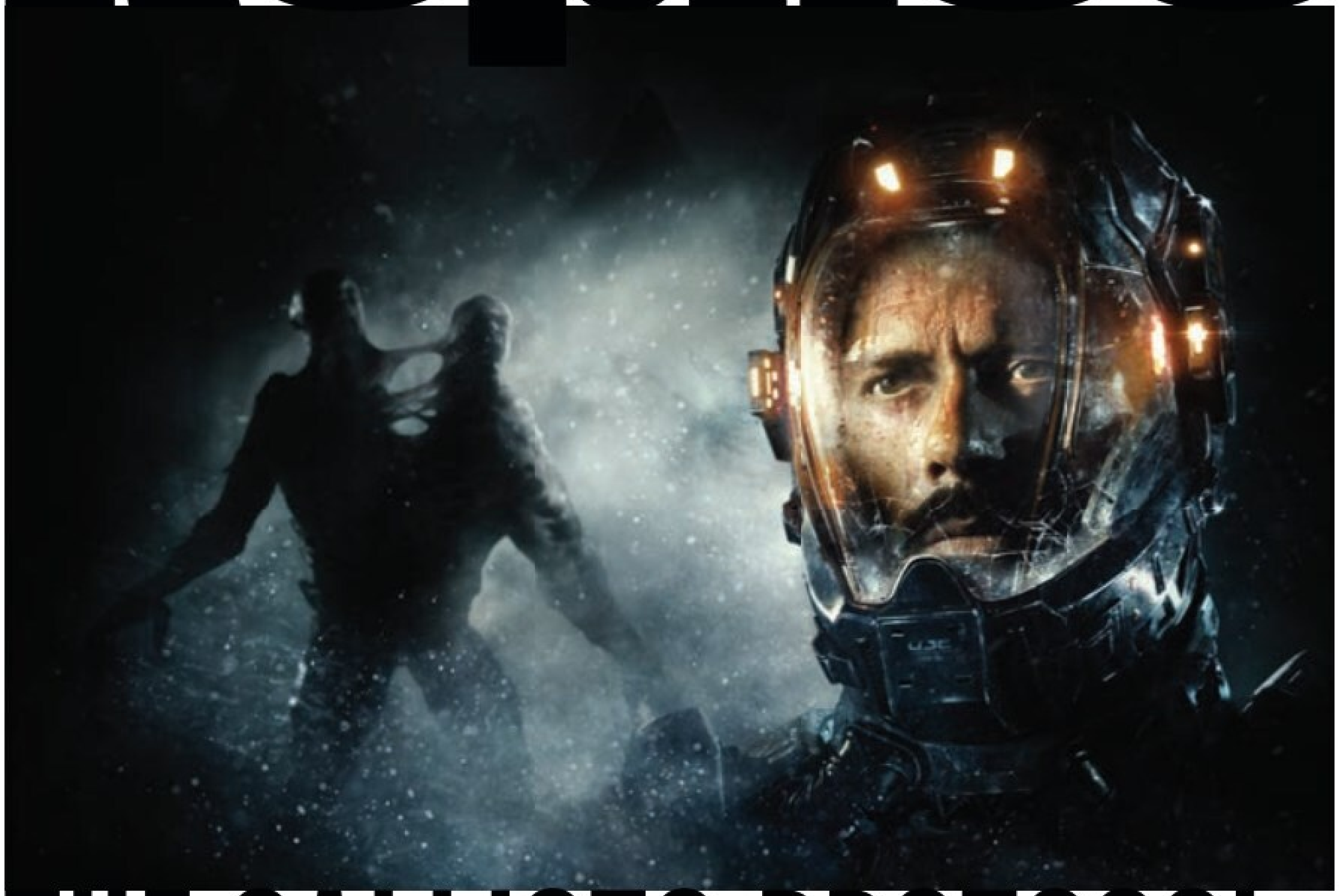


THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

Dead Space is the perfect example of a series that needs visionary direction. When creator Glen Schofield moved on in his career, Dead Space lost its way and almost became something entirely different with Dead Space 3. I'm glad he's getting another shot at bringing his sci-fi/horror vision to life with The Callisto Protocol. I hope it's a success story like Koji Igarashi's Castlevania spiritual successor, Bloodstained. Maybe Hideo Kojima will take note and create something like Metal Gear Solid again. Thanks for the great cover story, *Game Informer*!
– Jennesa Winding, Alpena, MI

↳ ***We would love to see Kojima create the next great tactical espionage action title, but we also hope the rumors of Death Stranding 2 are true. He's one of gaming's most celebrated creators, and we look forward to everything he releases. From what we've seen of Schofield's new horror experience, Dead Space fans have good reasons to be excited.***

Let me get this straight: At some point this year, we're getting The Callisto Protocol (which is basically Dead Space 4), and then early next year, a Dead Space remake. Why do things always happen in bunches? This is too much awesome to handle that close together! **– Tanner Berkley, San Francisco, CA**

↳ ***Sometimes developers and publishers chase trends – like the recent battle royale boom – but these two games releasing on top of each other appears to be a happy coincidence. Dead Space was due for a comeback, and both EA and Schofield decided now was the time.***

LEVELING UP THE BRAIN

Video games helped improve my cognitive skills. I have so much to thank from video games. I wouldn't be who I am today if it wasn't for them! **– Plastic_Hero via Instagram**

WHO IS THAT?

Why is Mitt Romney on the cover of Issue 345? To my knowledge, he is neither evil nor dead. Is he hunting evil or dead individuals with that chainsaw? If so, he needs to familiarize himself with appropriate safety procedures. His hand is alarmingly close to that damn blade. With concern,
– Page Kelley via email

↳ ***That would be Ash, the star of almost everything bearing The Evil Dead name. Ash is played by actor Bruce Campbell, who we hope reads this and takes on a career in politics after he's done cameoing in Marvel films. "Hail to the king, baby," is a political slogan we can get behind!***

LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE FROM GAMES

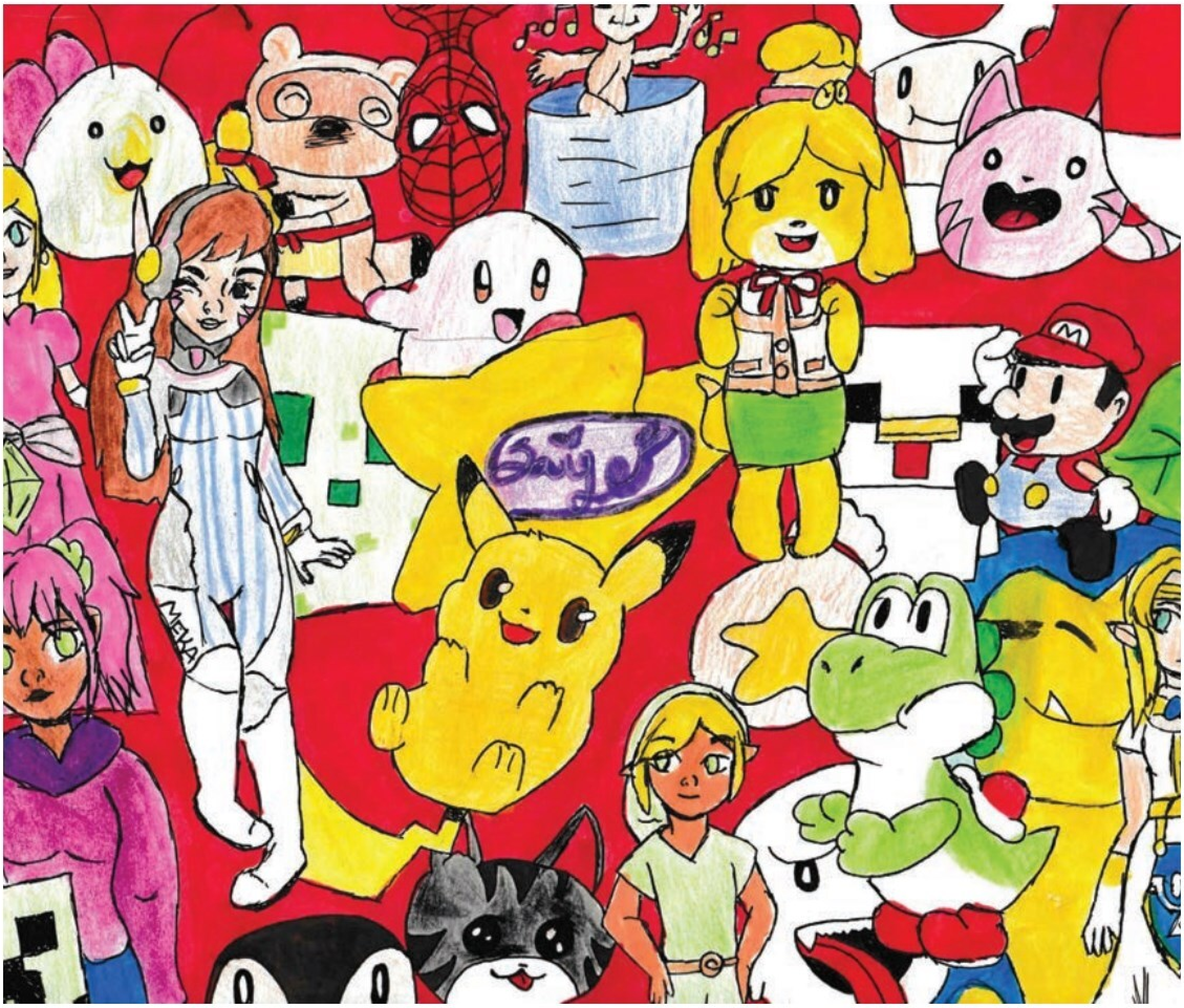
I learned more than half of my English from games. I also learned about history, cultures, rules, traditions, ancient gods ... I could go on and on. I was always criticized by my family for playing games, but it was just an hour a day. I now speak the best English of anyone in my house, all thanks to games!
– Jayant via Instagram

↳ ***Gaming can be as educational as any other entertainment medium, but always take time to read up on what you learned in a game to make sure you have the full story about a history, culture, or tradition. We recommend diving into the Assassin's Creed Discovery Tour series to begin learning about ancient Greece, Egypt, and the Viking Age.***

HOLD OR SELL?

I've picked up almost every console from the Nintendo 64 forward, and I still have all of them in boxes in my closet. When a new console hits, I never play the old machine it replaces again. I have no reason to look back. Should I sell them? Hold on to them for sentimental value? Are they worth anything? Help me, *Game Informer*!
– Scott McLewyn via email

↳ ***The first thing you want to do is look up the value of your old***



Reader art submission: Saige Hollabaugh, age 13

games and consoles. You may be sitting on a goldmine if your collection is in good shape. Next, think about what they mean to you, and perhaps who else you know may get something out of them. If you have no attachment or reason to keep them, sell away!

CHANGE IS GOOD

Can I just say how much I love the new *Game Informer*? Getting to put a face to a name with bios and spotlights and interesting facts about staff makes me feel more connected to an organization I already love. As a 34-year-old with a non-smart flip phone, a paper planner, and a love of the magazine's physical print copy, you are knocking it out of the park by making me feel connected to each and every issue. I look forward to receiving my issue each month even more than 15 years ago.
– Chris Backhaus via email

A PIRATE RPG

Before I begin, allow me to preface by saying I have never written in before. I always read the submissions, and enjoy them quite a bit, but always thought the idea of writing in was a waste of time. A one-in-a-million chance of being featured in the magazine and for what? To show your buddies "Hey look! That's my submission!" and a little self gratification? I'll pass. However, I operate with a different objective now. Wesley LeBlanc's staff spotlight in issue 346 about the lack of a pirate RPG resonated on such a deep level I rage quit IRL and tore through the house naked wrecking anything not nailed down. I screamed a resounding "Yes!" until my voice buckled and my vision went black. My buddy and I been saying this forever. We NEED a pirate RPG. How do we make this happen? Who do we have to write to? **– Nolan Gartzke via email**

↪ A good number of developers and publishers will read this, and maybe, just maybe, they'll start talking about a pirate RPG internally. We also don't know the fate of Ubisoft's long-delayed Skull & Bones. This pirate experience appeared to be mostly multiplayer focused when it was announced, but could reemerge with a different vision, given how long it has been gone.

↘ Join the conversation

Send your questions, comments, and rants to Feedback@GameInformer.com

Reader art submission: India Weaver

LUNAR: SILVER STAR STORY

As an old-school fan of classic JRPG's, I played Lunar: Silver Star and Lunar 2: Eternal Blue for Sega CD back in the day. I also played their remakes on PlayStation. They were my introduction to top-down, turn-based RPG's, and I played them before any Final Fantasy game. Lunar has so much charm and nostalgia, with their stories, characters, dialogue, music, and anime cut scenes. I'm surprised Sega and Working Designs haven't made the Lunar franchise available for purchase and download on the PS Store or Xbox Live. On eBay, the price of original Lunar physical copies is sky high, so there is demand. I know the Lunar games hold a special place in the hearts of older RPG fans, but they seem doomed to be lost and forgotten in the history of gaming. It's truly a shame these games can't be enjoyed by younger gamers and future generations. Let's start a petition or a Kickstarter campaign or do something to make these games available to the masses.
– Ryan McAulay, Troy, MI

↳ *Hundreds of great games from that generation have sadly been lost to time and likely won't make a return. Lunar wasn't as popular as Final Fantasy, but was every bit as important in shaping story-based RPGs. We would love to see a publisher pick up the rights and bring it back in some way. Restoring the classics is a good start, but the true prize is seeing what Lunar would be as a new-gen experience.*

Reader art submission: Charles Chaz Douglas

NEW IP

We still get Call of Duty every year and plenty of sequels, but it's nice to see so many big studios working on new intellectual properties. I can't wait to see what The Coalition and Sony Bend's new games are. I also just purchased The Quarry with the hope that it's as great as Until Dawn.
- Shal Q. via email

↳ *We echo your enthusiasm for new projects and can tell you The Quarry is the Until Dawn sequel you've been waiting for. You can read about it on page 75.*

Soundoff: Bring Them Back!

We asked our Discord community which game series they would like to see come back from extended hiatus. Here are their responses...

I've met real life friends in Asheron's Call who I am still friends with over 20 years later. The reason is the horizontal nature of the game was much like Elden Ring. Imagine Elden Ring if it was an MMO with a social structure that forced you to work together. Wouldn't be too bad, would it? **– ninjamasterdave**

I'm gonna put in a word for Lost Planet. One of Capcom's forgotten franchises, [that series] holds up incredibly well not just in terms of visuals, but also the frenetic and fun gameplay. In a world where shooter-Souls such as Returnal and shooty hack-and-slashers like the Nier series can thrive, I think it's time we bring back the big alien daddy of them all, Lost Planet. Plus, I think relegating cool new weather effects primarily to the racing genre is a sad story – I want that visual flair in my third-person shooters, too! **– noah**

The Legend of Dragoon. While other JRPGs at the time were turn-based with single-click attacks, [Dragoon's] combat delivered timing-based combos for each character, where doing them perfectly increased their stats. Another iteration could be amazing, because I don't think this type of game has had better combat since. It also came out at a time when games were therapy in my teenage years and I sunk so many hours into it. **– Joodonkadonk**

FOR THE KIDS!

I want to shout out the EIC for all the articles about getting your kids into video games. I always look forward to these in the mag and just bought Mario Maker 2 for my daughter's birthday this week, per his rec. I would also recommend Chicory for other parents as a good intro game. My daughter could mostly just paint with the second controller and had a blast. Some themes aren't completely the best for kids, but we were able to talk through them together. Also, every Disney movie deals with death, so...
– Chalkfullof via Discord

I just wanted to let you know I've enjoyed your All Ages editorials. As a result of your recommendations, my daughter and I have been playing Farm Together (to her complete exclusion of everything else). It has some educational value concerning planning, spending, and resource management. I feel that fathers of young children are a neglected market, so I appreciate your work in bringing this information to those of us who wouldn't otherwise know. Previously, I had to do a lot of digging around in Steam to find something cooperative and age appropriate. I look forward to the rest of your series. Thank you! **– Matt via email**

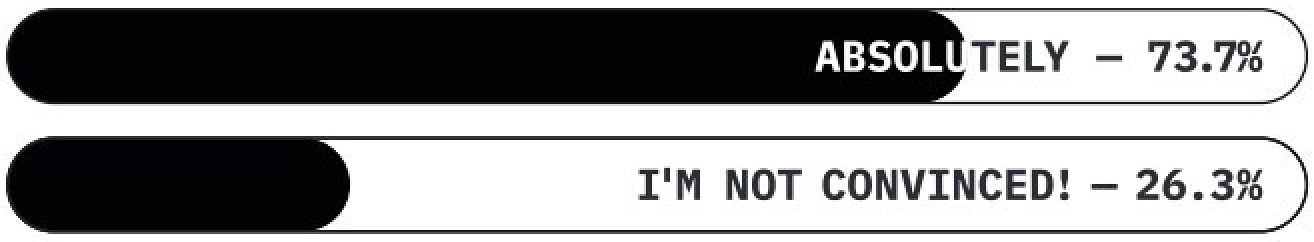
↳ *Reiner: The response to All Ages has been tremendous and a little overwhelming given the number of people who are writing in with similar stories and suggestions. I'll do my best to field every topic and hope to bring more All Ages editorials to* Game Informer's *website in the months ahead. Getting our kids moving in the right direction with gaming is an important part of their lives and something parents and guardians can also benefit from.*

FRIENDSHIPS AND GAMES

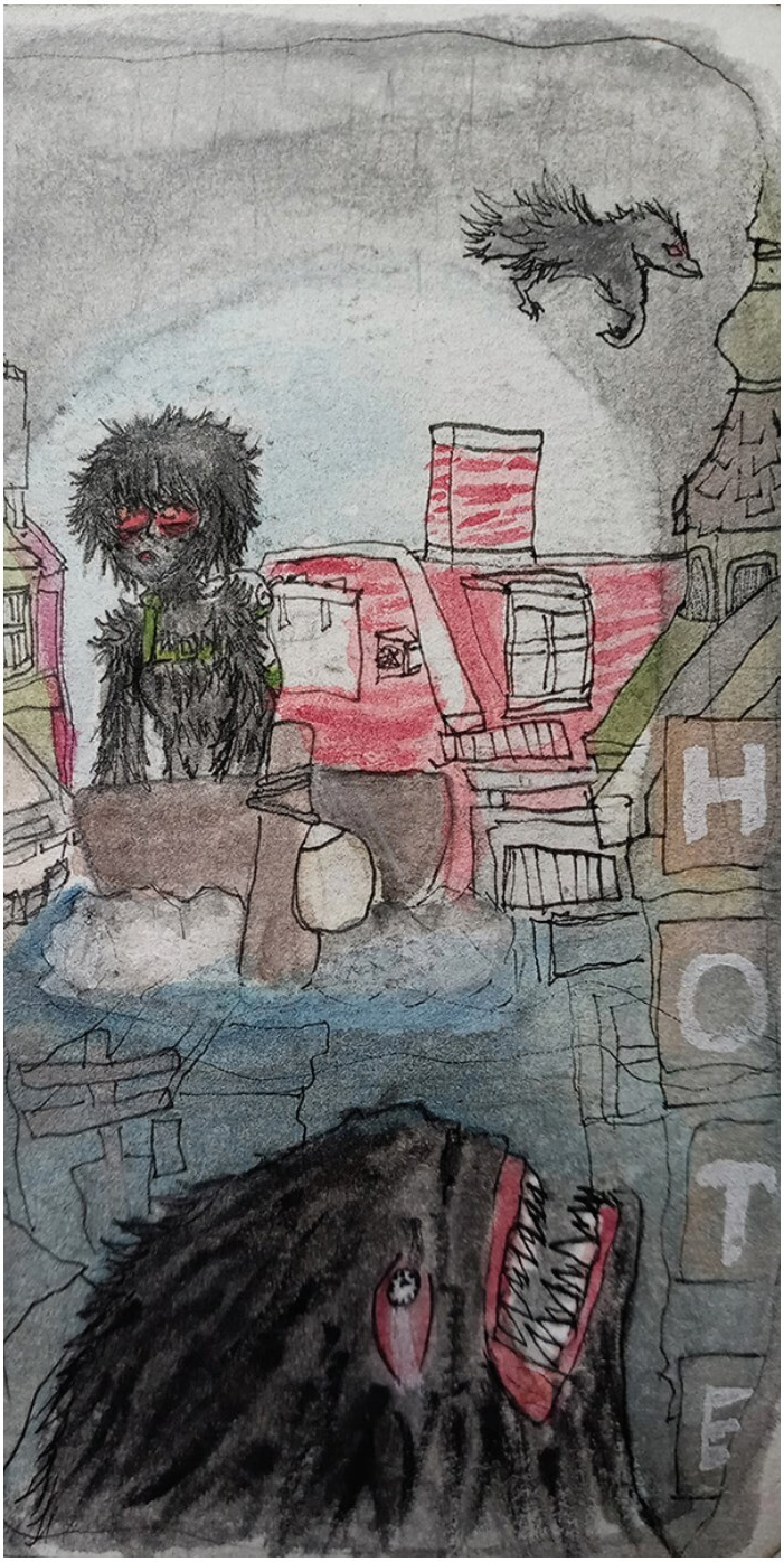
I've been playing video games for 33 years. Almost everything I know, I know from games: friendship, camaraderie, bravery, heroism, and a lot about cultures, history, and culinary traditions.
– Behzad_Dono via Instagram ■

Poll:

Hardware shortages aside, is upgrading to a PS5 and/or Xbox Series X/S worth it?



4,086 votes (poll conducted on Twitter on May 23)



Reader art winner: Angel Camacho

Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!

Please include your name and email address. Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media. Email to: ReaderArt@GameInformer.com

TOP FIVE

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG SPIN-OFFS

Sending the Blue Blur for a loop

BY BRIAN SHEA

1 Mario may have pioneered the kart-racing genre, but Sonic has had his share of success on the track. Team Sonic Racing is the most recent entry in the series, but the terrific **Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed** is the pinnacle of Sonic's racing career.

2 Long before Sonic joined the Super Smash Bros. roster, he brawled his friends in **Sonic Battle**, a Game Boy Advance fighting game with combo-heavy mechanics, a fun story mode, and RPG-style progression.

3 **Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020** is the best version of the original Mario/Sonic crossover series thanks to retro-style 2D minigames, a great roster of characters, and a solid multiplayer party experience.

4 In mobile marketplaces full of free-to-play endless runners, few franchises fit better than Sonic. **Sonic Dash** brought the speedy protagonist into the genre in 2013, but the 2022 Apple Arcade version, Sonic Dash+, delivers all the thrills with no ads or microtransactions.

5 One of the most well-known offshoots of the Sonic franchise came early in the Blue Blur's existence. **Sonic Spinball** took Sega's mascot to one of the most novel concepts the series has had just two years after his Genesis debut. ■

ALL AGES

HIDDEN TERRORS

Protecting your children from horror in games

BY ANDREW REINER

A FEW YEARS AGO, my daughter and I played A Hat in Time. A colorful platforming experience seen through the eyes of a little girl, it seemed perfect for us. My daughter was into platformers at the time and immediately latched onto the goofy antics of Hat in Time's character. She enjoyed the opening moments so much that I think she spent a good five minutes doing nothing more than jumping onto pillows in the girl's bedroom. Within the first week, I thought it could be our game – it felt like we were bonding over something we discovered together.

It was the perfect daddy and daughter game until an unexpected horror element kicked in. One of the worlds (Queen Vanessa's Manor) mimics a slasher flick, and it terrified my daughter so much she wanted to stop playing. The world featured jump scares, a horrific shadow creature, and even forces the girl to hide to avoid Queen Vanessa. It was a complete change in tone for a game that was bubbly and fun up to this point.

I figured I would finish the area without her nearby, and after a three-day break, she would warm to it again. When I asked her if she wanted to continue our journey, she looked at me like I had lost my mind. "I never want to play it again," she said. My heart sunk. She told me the demon was in one of her nightmares. As I hugged her, I was reminded of a similar experience I had during my own childhood.

At six or seven, I went with my family to see *The Rescuers*, Disney's then-newest animated movie. It seemed innocent enough. The story unfolded through the antics of two talking mice. But I left the theater shaken. I thought the villain, Madame Medusa, a horribly tempered soul, came to life and lived in the shadows of my room when I tried to fall asleep. I had numerous nightmares about her and was traumatized by *The Rescuers* so much that I was scared of other Disney movies for a few years.

We all see things differently, and it can be difficult to identify elements that may scare our children. However, some characters like Madame Medusa or that demon in A Hat in Time are designed to be scary and should be easy to pinpoint by parents and guardians. I should have stopped playing A Hat in Time with my daughter when the tone changed.

I checked the ESRB rating for the game after we shelved it, and I believe it was appropriately listed as Teen, yet only listed "blood and fantasy violence" as its guidance. We thankfully didn't see any blood in the game, but I think "horror" should be there as well. I'm to blame for letting my daughter play this game. I thought it would be fine, but that didn't end up being the case.

I want to experience new games with my daughter. I want us to be surprised by what comes next while we adventure together. What happened with A Hat in Time made me want to play through games completely before introducing them to her. Given the time commitment this would require, that isn't a realistic scenario. When she showed interest in Five Nights at Freddy's, I spent 20 minutes with the game and deemed it too scary for her. That was an easy one to identify, and I believe most games are. We just have to be there with them in their early years when they play games that may shift tones.

With each new game she plays (or show she watches), I first research the title, sometimes searching for it with keywords that could apply, like "horror" or "gore." It's been smooth sailing for us since implementing this new process. ■

As always, I'd love to hear from you. What precautions do you take to protect your kids from elements that may scare them? Let me know at Reiner@GameInformer.com

INDIE INVASION

Gaming's smaller titles are a massive part of the industry

BY JILL GRODT

Stardew Valley just hit over 20 million copies sold. Nearly half of *Game Informer*'s highest-scoring games of 2022 so far are independent titles. Arguably now more than ever, the industry's smaller games loom large over its biggest platforms, so it's not difficult to find great titles wherever you're playing.

Xbox

Microsoft is tight-lipped about its Game Pass program, but it's easy to see independent titles taking over. In just the last few months, a mind-boggling number of wildly entertaining games hit the service. Tunic, featured on the company's E3 stage in 2018, is one of Game Pass' greatest offerings this year. It's also one of *Game Informer*'s best-scored games of 2022, as it blends nostalgic gameplay, compelling mystery, and eye-catching art into a fantastic package. Not to be left out, Loot River sailed its way onto Game Pass early last month. The challenging roguelike's looping narrative offers thrilling fights and mixes puzzle-solving with traversal.

The ID@Xbox program, which gives independent developers the tools to self-publish on Microsoft platforms, now feeds into and benefits from the subscription service. Looking back over its nearly 9-year history in a recent blog post, ID@Xbox exec Chris Charla said, "There are amazing games out today on Xbox (and other platforms!) that would never have existed without the support of Game Pass members, and that's really been an incredible phenomenon."

PlayStation

If there's one thing Sony and Microsoft have in common, it's highlighting indies on their massive platforms, and over the last few years, PlayStation has been an excellent home for smaller games.

Kena: Bridge of Spirits, a console-exclusive released in 2021, is a delightfully polished action/adventure following a young spirit guide helping people pass on to the afterlife. Its touching story and intense combat earned it the Best Independent Game at The Game Awards last year and some bragging rights for Sony.

Indie games also have a big presence in Sony's State of Play livestreams. The showcases typically feature an array of great titles that rank high on fans' must-play lists but do sometimes focus on one specific title instead of many. Bugsnax, which asks players to capture whimsical food-inspired creatures, received an enormous update in its own State of Play last October. The DLC, called The Isle of Bigsnax, launched in April and was free for all PlayStation owners who already purchased the PlayStation 5 launch title.

Switch

Nintendo is so invested in its indie darlings that it created a unique nickname for them: Nindies. And just coming off an Indie World Showcase in May, it's easy to see Nintendo is as overflowing with the independent games as its rivals. You can find standouts from the show scattered amongst our preview roundup [pg. 68], but even when indies don't show up, it can be big news.

Hollow Knight: Silksong didn't make its long-awaited appearence at the May showcase. This upset fans who feared Team Cherry's bug-centric, Metroid-inspired title was stalled in development. These worries were later lifted when the anticipated game made its summer debut the following month. However, Ooblets showed up in May to give fans a treat. Its developer, Glumberland, announced the whimsical Pokémon-esque game would get a 1.0 launch on Switch in the next few months.

Though it has a reputation for being a family-friendly platform, Nintendo's recent Indie World presentation had more than a few darker-themed games. With its richly detailed, hand-drawn art, Silt drips with eerie energy. The protagonist takes the form of a scuba diver who drifts through a black-and-white underwater world. Likewise, Cult of the Lamb sent some spooky signals. Not only is the title's main objective to gather followers to your unholy cause, but it stars an adorable sheep. Somehow, that makes it more unsettling.

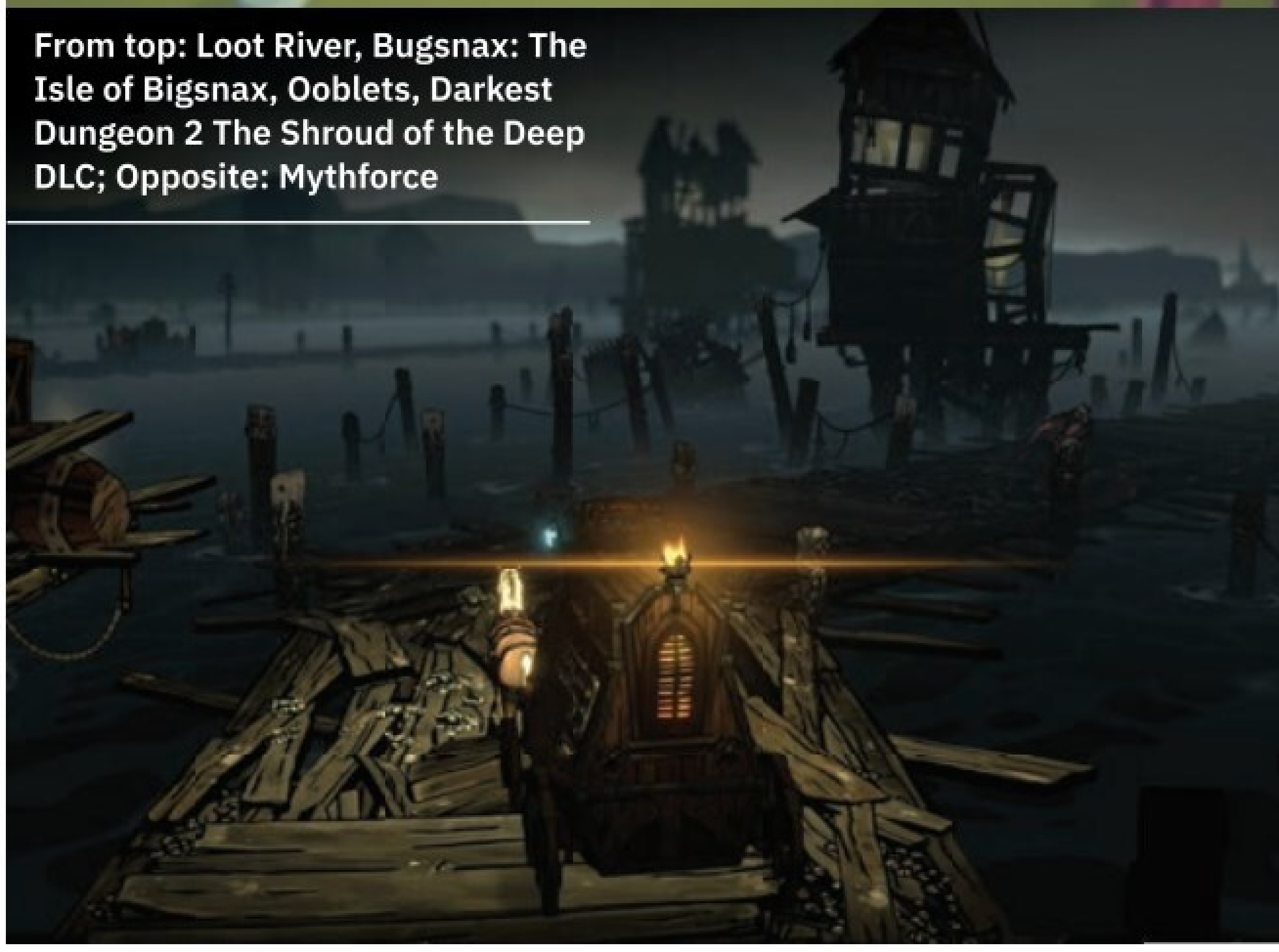
PC

Of course, there's no place to find indies like PC. The Epic Games Store boasts that it takes less revenue from games featured on its platform than competitors, which helps attract smaller teams needing to stretch the budget as far as it can go. This may be one of the reasons EGS hosts an abundance of high-profile, independently made games in its Early Access program. The eagerly awaited Darkest Dungeon 2 is now in Epic Early Access. It lets players glimpse a world devastated by the original game's evil forces, and developer Red Hook Studios just released a huge update called The Shroud of the Deep. MythForce, infinitely more lighthearted than Red Hook's title, is also a worthwhile game in Epic's Early Access program. Inspired by '80s cartoons, the multiplayer roguelite is great with friends.

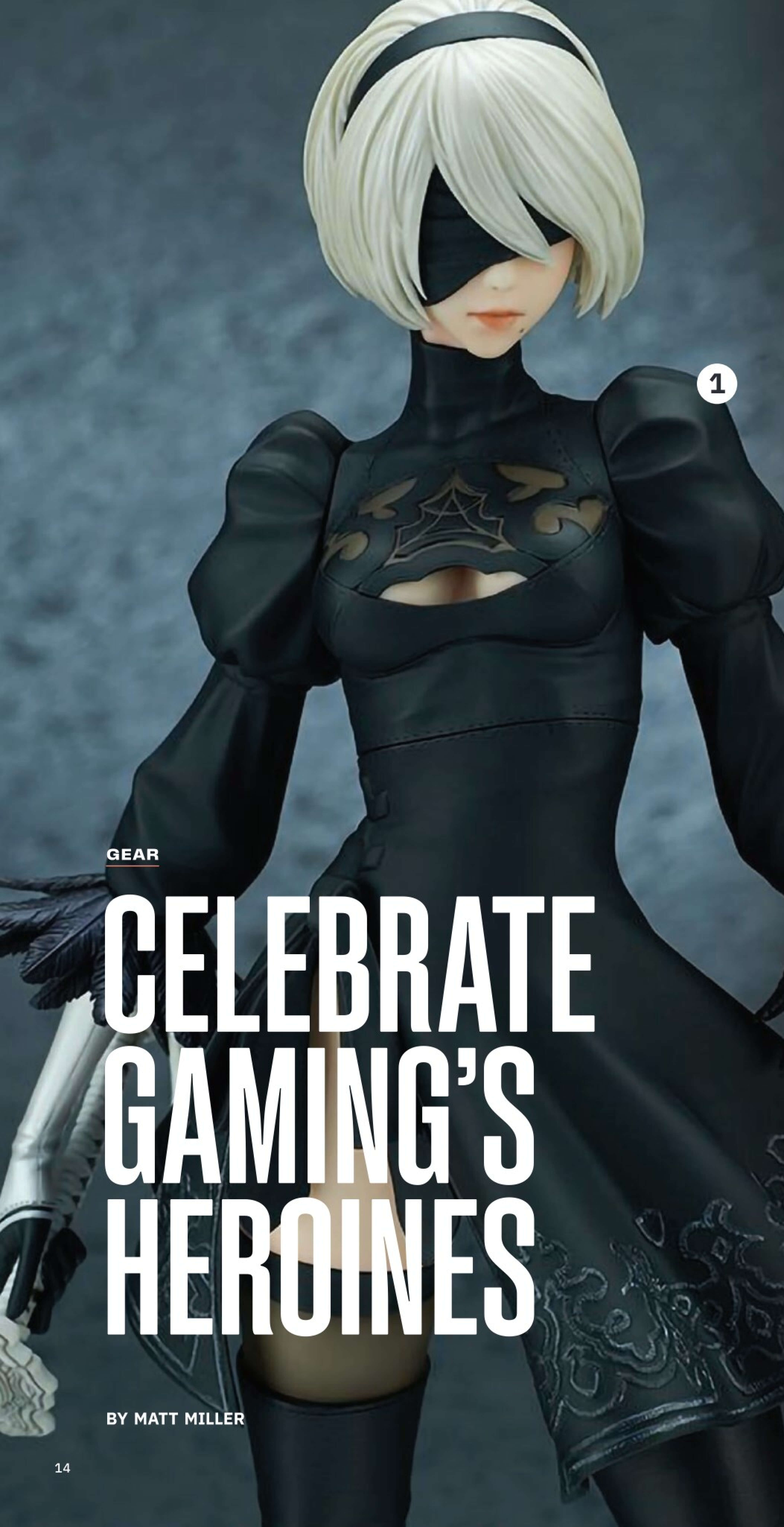
But any talk of indie gaming on PC is incomplete without Steam. In 2022, it continues to be one of the most popular places for independent creators, thanks to events like the Steam Next Fest. This demo-stuffed festival, which almost exclusively highlights indies, became a global celebration during the pandemic when players could no longer travel to big conventions, and typically features hundreds of bite-sized experiences.

Of course, there are also a slew of indie-centric PC spaces besides Steam and EGS, including GOG, Itch.io, The Humble Store, and many more.

We're only halfway through the year, and with all the fantastic indie news and reveals during this summer's showcase season, it looks like crafted indie experiences will continue to grow in the industry. ■



From top: Loot River, Bugsnax: The Isle of Bigsnax, Ooblets, Darkest Dungeon 2 The Shroud of the Deep DLC; Opposite: Mythforce



GEAR

CELEBRATE GAMING'S HEROINES

BY MATT MILLER

① NIER: AUTOMATA 2B FIGURINE

Square Enix rarely opens the door to external creators working on official likenesses, but this striking piece from Flare is undoubtedly up to the high-quality threshold collectors expect. Standing just under a foot in height, the Yorha android features meticulous sculpting and a strident pose, while the figure's paint and finishing offer eerily realistic contrasts between 2B's light skin and hair against her dark outfit. Go for the standard edition to focus on the character and her Virtuous Contract Sword; the deluxe edition offers alternate costuming and the inclusion of Tactical Support Unit Pod 042.

$149 (Standard), ($219) Deluxe | *store.na.square-enix-games.com*

② FUNKO POP! TINY TINA

Funko POP!'s have become a ubiquitous part of collectible culture in recent years. Even with the incredible variety of available figures, some stand out from the crowd. Tiny Tina's quirky appearance from her recent game is lovingly recreated in the Funko style, with mismatched shoes, a playful outfit, and magic at the ready. Butt Stallion sold separately.

$12.00 | *funko.com*

③ WORLD OF WARCRAFT JAINA PROUDMOORE STATUE

One of Azeroth's greatest heroes gets her due in this centerpiece collectible from Blizzard. The 21-inch tall polyresin statue shows the Alliance hero standing resolute in the face of danger. Jaina has her Lord Admiral's Pendant in hand, ready to lead the fleet home, even as her downturned staff reminds viewers of her tremendous power. The by-hand painting offers exquisite detail, from the individual buttons to textured cloth, to subtle hair-color gradation. At the same time, the sculpt reveals a natural upflowing of water as it rises into nascent magic. It's the perfect cornerstone piece for any Warcraft collection or just to celebrate the awesomeness of mages in general.

$600 | *gear.blizzard.com*

❹ THE WITCHER 3 – WILD HUNT: CIRI STATUE

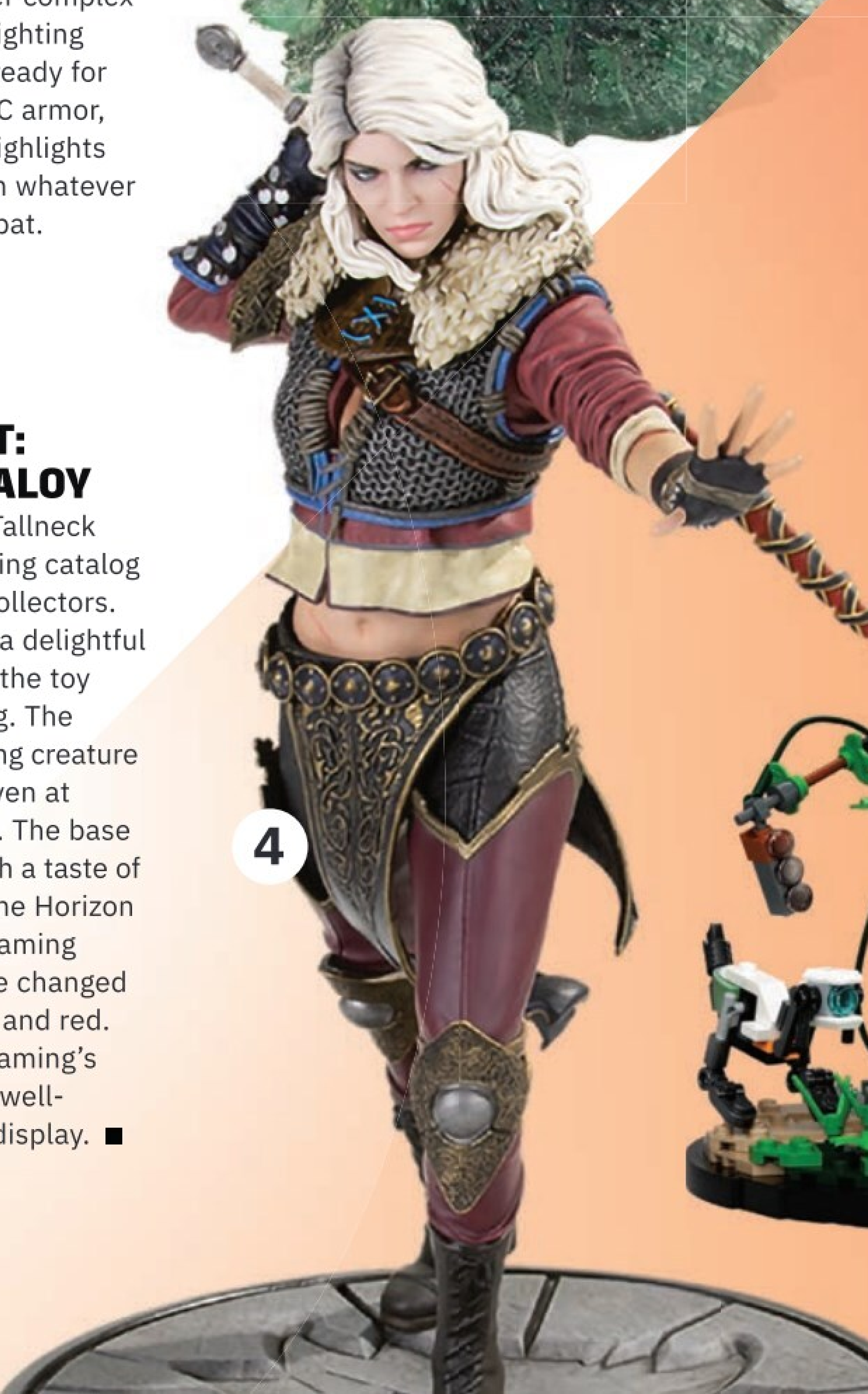
Dark Horse has a reputation for impressive collectibles that often don't break the bank, and its excellent line of Witcher statues proves the case. Geralt may get the limelight in the fiction, but Ciri remains a fan-favorite thanks to her complex backstory and tenacious fighting ability. She appears here ready for battle in her Wild Hunt DLC armor, with bright red and gold highlights that help the figure pop on whatever shelf she is set to do combat.

$49.99 | *darkhorse.com*

❺ LEGO HORIZON FORBIDDEN WEST: TALLNECK WITH ALOY

Aloy and the remarkable Tallneck machine join LEGO's growing catalog of sets targeted at adult collectors. The 1,200+ piece build is a delightful exercise characterized by the toy maker's smart engineering. The elegant lines of the towering creature remain sturdy and solid even at nearly 14 inches in height. The base is almost diorama-like, with a taste of the tech-infused flora of the Horizon game world and even a roaming Watcher whose eye can be changed out between blue, yellow, and red. Aloy is is one of modern gaming's defining protagonists and well-deserving of this colorful display. ■

$79.99 | *lego.com*



OPINION

WRESTLING GAMES SHOULD EXPAND TO MORE GENRES

BY MARCUS STEWART

PRO WRESTLING IS A COMBAT SPORT. Scripted, yes, but the crux is two athletes stepping into a ring and (mostly) pretending to beat the snot out of each other. That's why it's been understandably boxed into the fighting/simulation category. Outside of collectible card games and general manager sims, the genre rarely strays beyond its competitive roots, and that's a shame. Wrestling can offer so much more to video games.

The upcoming RPG WrestleQuest is a great example of how a little creativity goes a long way. It translates the core concepts of wrestling into an adventure inspired by games like Chrono Trigger. It's such a refreshing idea, and WWE has announced plans to develop a role-playing game as well. Rumbleverse applies the sport's tropes to a battle royale. Let's keep that momentum going.

Drama is essential to wrestling. Highlight that in a choice-driven adventure game at the caliber of a Quantic Dream or Telltale Games title. Let me choose alliances, belts to chase, and make other pivotal decisions. Imagine having the staggering web of possibilities present in games like Detroit: Become Human. Do I join a faction to ascend to the top? Betray my tag-team partner? Present multiple endings based on my decisions. WWE game modes such as 2K22's MyRise have offered relatively barebones versions of this for years, but it can be fleshed out into a separate, deeper experience.

A wrestling adventure doesn't have to be the cliché rags-to-riches stories of a rookie climbing the ranks and becoming a star. Films such as *The Wrestler* prove you can tell an engaging human drama about life outside of the ring. Imagine a game set in the '70s/'80s starring a washed-up wrestler struggling to make ends meet and grappling with personal conflicts. Perhaps it's a crime drama because the protagonist associates with unsavory individuals à la Dino Bravo, paving the way for combat and even gunplay. I could see a studio like Naughty Dog or Rockstar pulling off a gritty period piece that just happens to star a wrestler.

Remember WWE Crush Hour, a bizarre take on Twisted Metal-style car combat? That was a silly idea. Let's bring that back, too, because why not? And how about a rhythm music game featuring entrance themes! We can only upload Sami Zayn's old song to Beat Saber for so long. How about a Coffee Talk-style restaurant sim where you run a Waffle House and treat traveling wrestlers to chicken breasts and egg whites as they regale you with road stories?

Expanding the scope of wrestling games could win over new audiences who may not otherwise encounter the genre. Those who may not love the in-ring action may fall in love with wrestling's over-the-top presentation and quirks. Even diehard fans can benefit; some folks simply don't excel at or enjoy a mechanics-laden grappling sim.

You can do a ton with sports entertainment in video games. I just hope more developers – and wrestling companies, for that matter – see this potential and become more willing to take a chance. ■

OPINION

DOES SONY'S REVAMPED PLAYSTATION PLUS HAVE TO BE THIS CONFUSING?

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

WHEN SONY ANNOUNCED its revamped PlayStation Plus back in March, I was left scratching my head. Do we really need three tiers? Nevertheless, there were things to be excited about.

It combines PS Plus with PlayStation Now, a no-brainer move I've hoped to see for years. Plus, it opens me up to more than 700 games ranging from PlayStation 5 back to the original PlayStation. But with the launch now behind us, I'm still not convinced the service needs to be this confusing.

From the jump, figuring out the tier for you is a hurdle. Do you want the equivalent of PS Plus as it stands today? Then, pick the Essential tier. Do you want something better? Well, you'd think just having one more tier – like how Microsoft has Xbox Game Pass and Ultimate – would make sense. Instead, there are two more options. There's Extra, which adds a bonus catalog of up to 400 PlayStation 5 and PlayStation 4 games, and Premium, which includes what Essential offers, plus PlayStation 3 (as cloud-streaming games only), PlayStation 2, PlayStation, and PlayStation Portable games. As a bonus, Premium also offers time-limited game trials.

Then there's PlayStation Deluxe. This is the Premium tier if cloud streaming isn't available in your region – with a lower price as a result. I like that Sony offers the discounted cost, but giving it an entirely different name makes everything more confounding.

On top of the existing confusion, there's also the way Sony refers to some of its games. In the leadup to launch, a blog showcased 10 classic games initially released on PlayStation and PSP. However, there was also a list of 19 more classic games – why weren't they included above? Well, because Sony decided to call these "remastered classics." These are all PS4 games, but what is "remastered" referring to? Sony says some of its classics will "show improved frame rates and higher-quality resolution." So are the PlayStation and PSP games going to have these improvements, or are the classic remastered games going to have them? Is that why Sony is calling them remasters of classics?

No, actually. The remastered classics are the enhanced PS2 games that launched on PS4 years ago. That's why games like Dark Cloud 2 and Jak II might look familiar. It's not that these are receiving further improvements – they're just being brought forward to this revamped PS Plus service. It seems Sony has separated these PS2 remasters from PS1 and PSP games as a roundabout way to say, "Don't expect any frame rate or resolution improvements on the PS1/PSP games being added to PS Plus," or at least that's what it seems. Sure would be nice if PlayStation made this clear, though, wouldn't it?

Maybe you're reading this saying, "Wesley, this is so simple; how do you not understand?" but something tells me I'm not alone. Sony's revamped PS Plus is a great service – even if it's not the Xbox Game Pass competitor many anticipated – and I'm excited it exists. I just wish Sony had explained the relaunch more clearly. ■

PlayStation Plus
ESSENTIAL
EXTRA
PREMIUM

BRING YOUR FAVORITE VIDEO GAME TO THE TABLE

Awesome tabletop games drawn from the video game world **BY MATT MILLER**

HORIZON
ZERO DAWN
THE BOARD GAME

1

4

6

2

5

❶ HORIZON ZERO DAWN: THE BOARD GAME

After Horizon Forbidden West, it's well worth exploring this semi-cooperative adventure board game. Players take on the role of Hunters, venturing out to take down machines in the wild in high-intensity encounters. Everyone works together on the hunt, but only one takes home the final glory. This board game version wins high marks for the incredibly detailed unpainted miniatures, especially several of the extra-large miniatures, like the Sawtooth. Gameplay has a fun give-and-take flow between tactical battles and the upgrading fun of the "campfire phase." This is a deep and complex board game of battles and character improvements, but it's well worth pushing through the challenging learning curve if you treasure this richly drawn world.

$109 | *steamforged.com*

3

❷ BLOODBORNE: THE BOARD GAME

Bloodborne is one of From Software's greatest success stories. The Lovecraftian tale of a city fallen into madness offers ample inspiration for adaptation into a board game format, proven in CMON's cooperative campaign adventure. Each player controls a Hunter as they face one devastating foe after the next. Death is common, sending you back to the Hunter's Dream before facing the nightmare again. Stark, striking art perfectly captures the tone of Bloodborne. But it's the board game's unique card-based combat that makes this one special, stripping away luck as a factor and demanding intelligent decision-making in every encounter.

$109 | *cmon.com*

❸ KINGDOM RUSH: RIFT IN TIME

The Kingdom Rush franchise offers some of the most enjoyable mobile strategy fun around. Lucky Duck Games has zeroed in on a riveting system for transitioning the whimsical tower defense formula onto the tabletop, complete with great hero characters, a selection of distinct buildable structure tiles, and a relentless march of bad guys slowly advancing across the board. The fun tactical challenge (which veers from the video game) is that each tower can throw down different polyominoes (think Tetris pieces) to cover up slots on the advancing enemy tiles to take them out. The effect is almost like solving a puzzle to knock out all your foes before you lose. Rift in Time is fully cooperative and can function as an ongoing campaign, with each scenario offering new challenges. Not an easy game to win, by any stretch, but great fun is found in the attempt.

$59.99 | *luckyduckgames.com*

❹ RESIDENT EVIL 3: THE BOARD GAME

In this team-oriented survival game, players work together to make it through Raccoon City, face off against Nemesis, and ultimately escape. In practice, it plays out like a claustrophobic and engaging dungeon crawl, albeit with the added thematic elements of zombies, urban exploration, and familiar characters like Jill Valentine in your control. Emulating the gradually ratcheting danger of the video game, Resident Evil 3's tabletop incarnation features a tension deck and an ever-increasing inherent danger to remaining in the city, leading to a pleasant ramp-up of horror-themed pressure as the game unfolds.

$109 | *steamforged.com*

❺ THE GAME OF LIFE: SUPER MARIO

Hasbro's massive catalog of family-friendly board games has sometimes been guilty of reskinning a gaming property with little meaningful attempt at adaptation. However, this colorful mash-up of Life and Super Mario does an excellent job taking the best from both. The spinner has been a fun way to move around spaces for decades, which remains true today. But the addition of minigames, companion cards, and vibrant Mario figures and art do a lot to help everything feel fresh. Gather enough stars to defeat Bowser, and you win. Squarely built for kids and their parents, it's an easy way to tie a family love of Nintendo's loveable mascot into your weekly family game night.

$29.99 | *hasbro.com*

❻ ORLOG: ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA DICE GAME

In a fun twist for Assassin's Creed Valhalla fans, PureArts and Ubisoft partnered to create this faithful version of the Orlog dice game that appeared in the video game. Like when Eivor rolled the same, two players compete through quick dice-rolling rounds of attacks, defenses, and steals, all represented by the different faces on the cubes. Deplete your opponent's health pool to win. Orlog is simple and fast to play, and surprisingly engaging as quick filler fun in between other bigger games. The components are beautiful, and the exchanges are thoughtfully balanced for some fun tactical decisions. Just watch out for angry Viking opponents. ■

$39.99 | *merch.ubisoft.com*

*We spent hours dashing through **Sonic Frontiers** and talking with influential members of the Blue Blur's past and present to learn how the world's most famous hedgehog bounced back to once again become a relevant player in video games and beyond*

BY BRIAN SHEA

BRAVE NEW WORLD

In the 1990s, few characters reached the heights of Sonic the Hedgehog.

Shortly after the 1991 launch of the Blue Blur's debut game on Sega Genesis, his popularity rivaled Nintendo's behemoth Super Mario franchise. However, much like the roller coasters that inspired Sonic's original gameplay and level design, the subsequent decades included plenty of highs and lows. Even after a quick jump off the starting line, many feared the series was doomed to fall short of its potential forever.

However, the brand has experienced something of a renaissance in recent years. The Sonic the Hedgehog franchise is perhaps nearly as popular now as when it burst onto the scene just over three decades ago, bolstered by blockbuster movies, beloved comics, and promising streaming shows. Sonic Mania proved a successful retro reinvention, but the core development staff at Sonic Team has yet to deliver the final piece of the puzzle: a mainline game restoring the series' legacy as one of the premier platformers.

Sega and Sonic Team think they have that final component with Sonic Frontiers. I traveled to Burbank, California, the American headquarters of Sonic Team, to sink hours into the upcoming open-world game to see if it truly is the fresh direction the franchise needs.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Platforming
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Sonic Team **RELEASE** Holiday

A One-Way Track

Former director of marketing at Sega of America Al Nilsen will never forget the first time he saw Sonic the Hedgehog in action. Nilsen visited Sega's research and development team in Tokyo, Japan in the early part of 1990. Months before, Nilsen helped select a rudimentary drawing of a blue hedgehog. It was the new flagship mascot of Sega's 16-bit era of console gaming, but nobody on the Sega of America side had seen Sonic in motion to that point.

As Nilsen entered the office, he spotted two monitors. On one screen, there was a wireframe environment with something speeding through it. At the same time, the second monitor displayed a beautiful, lush background beyond anything he'd seen in a video game before. He had no idea what it was at first, but it immediately drew him from across the room.

"I got closer, and I was like, 'Hey! That's that Sonic guy I saw on a piece of paper way back when,'" Nilsen recalls. "I walked up, and here is Sonic going through the loop-de-loop in Green Hill Zone, but it's just a wireframe. He was speeding through it, and my jaw just dropped. Then next to it was the background for Green Hill Zone."

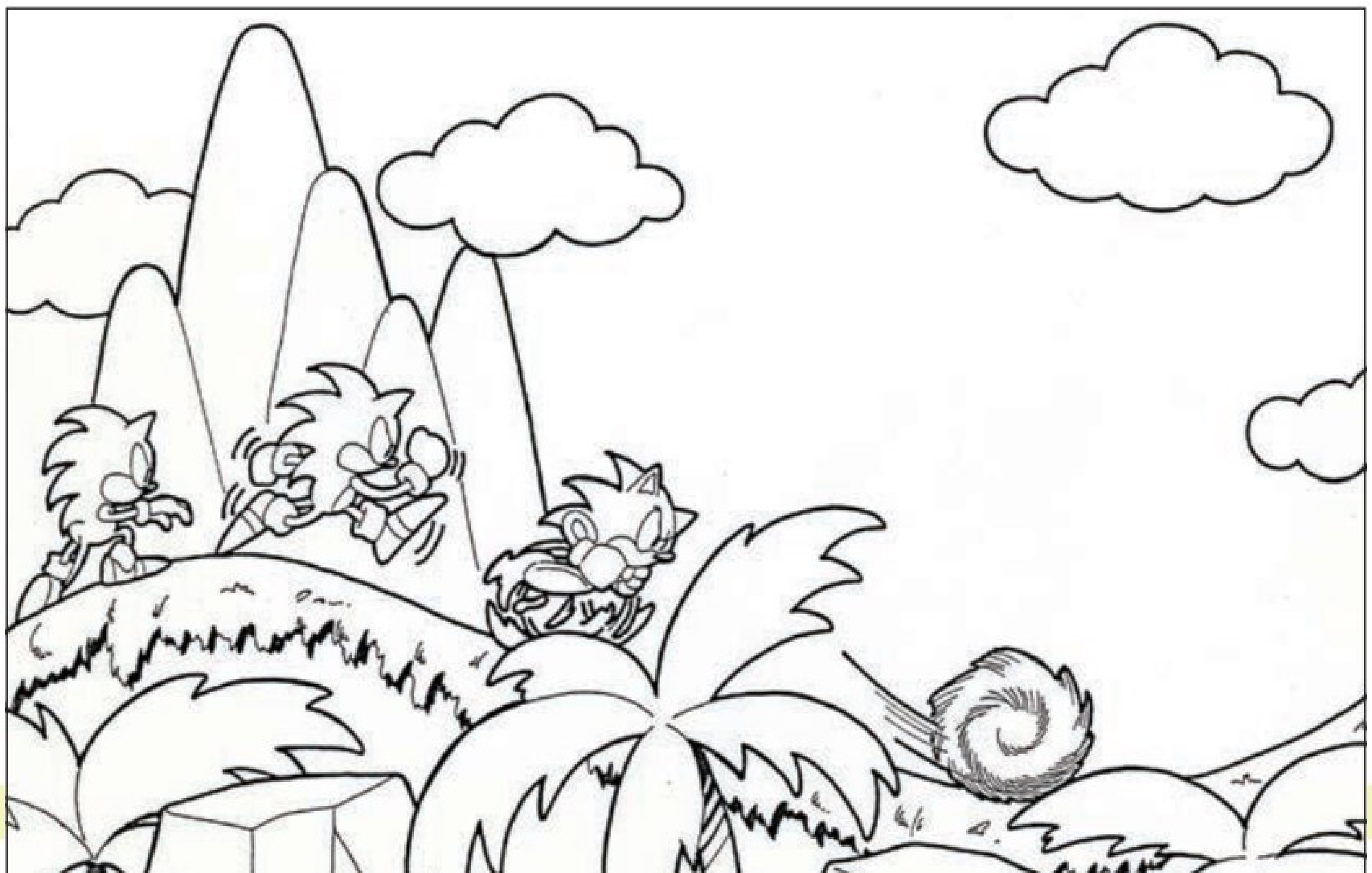
In awe, Nilsen turned to series cocreator Yuji Naka, who he had just met. He asked Naka if it was possible to combine the speed of the wireframe demo with the gorgeous background of the other monitor. When Naka told him it was, Nilsen immediately got on board.

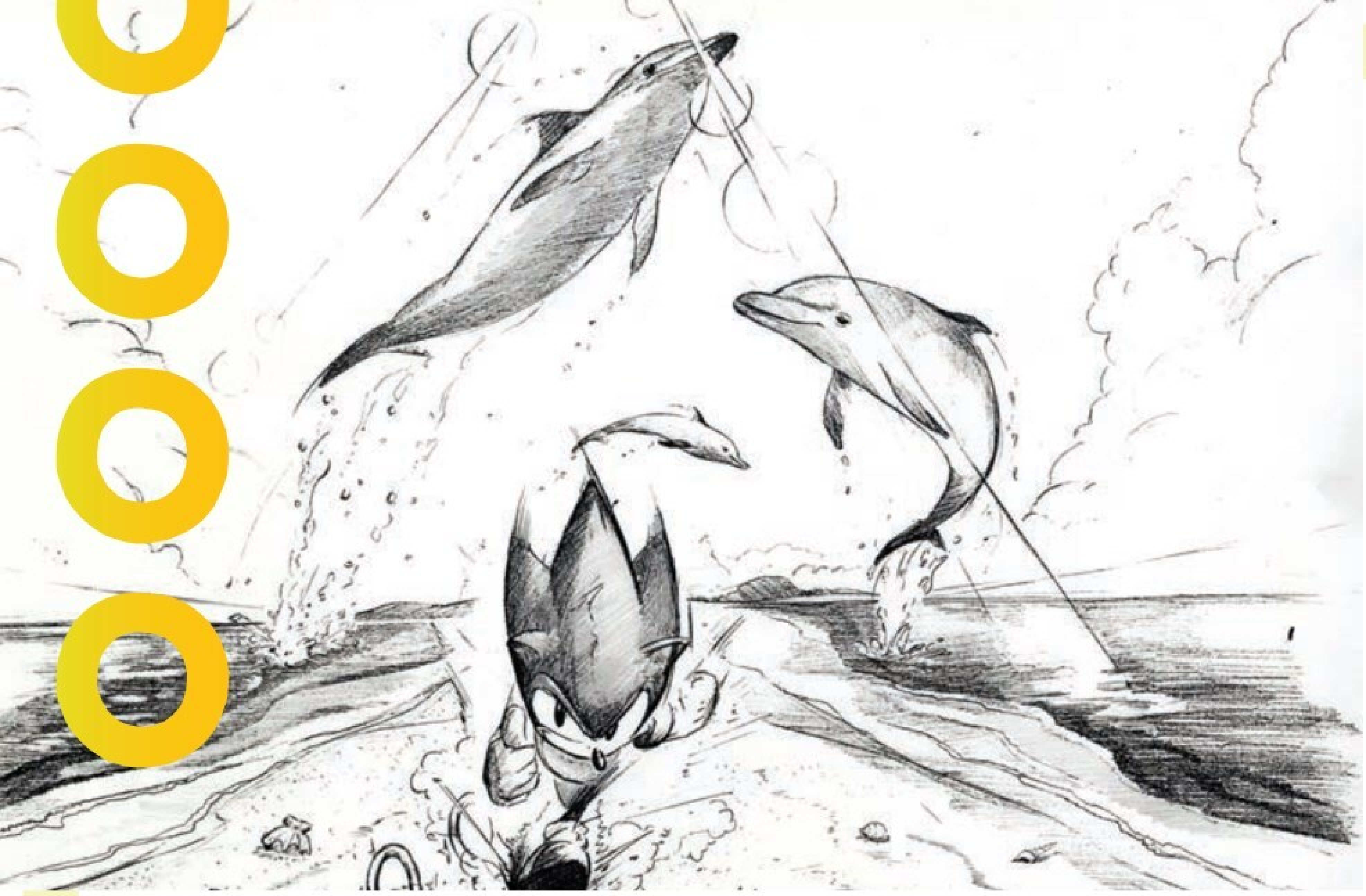
When Nilsen told then-president and CEO of Sega of America Tom Kalinske about the demo, he couldn't stop singing its praises. "They had never heard me rave about a game so much [as] when I got back, and they just wanted to see it," says Nilsen. "[That early demo] was what did it for me in terms of going, 'This is going to be something special for Sega.' It was amazing."

"Before Al went to Japan on that trip, we'd only seen drawings," Kalinske says. "We all knew we needed to have a character for Sega to fight against Nintendo and Mario. All we had were drawings of Sonic, and it was pretty hard to imagine it could be as fast as he turned out to be and as good as he turned out to be."

Sega knew it had a hit on its hands, but it needed to reveal Sonic at the right time for maximum effect. In 1991, Kalinske and Nilsen began pulling back the curtain. Following an enthusiastic response from players, licensors, and other business partners, Sonic the Hedgehog was well on its way to becoming the next great phenomenon in the video game industry.

But games were just the start. Sonic the Hedgehog became a licensing juggernaut alongside Sega's critically celebrated games. The United States ran two animated shows simultaneously, while toys, plushies, clothing, and other merchandise flooded store shelves. Sega had its hit, but it wasn't until Sonic the Hedgehog 2 that the Blue Blur truly became a household name.





Following an astoundingly successful marketing campaign called "Sonic 2sday" and universal acclaim, Sonic the Hedgehog 2 became the highest-selling game of 1992, outpacing other classics like Street Fighter II and The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past. Sonic 2 set the franchise's ceiling higher than its predecessor. And in the near-term, at least, the series delivered on that potential, with Sonic CD, Sonic the Hedgehog 3, and Sonic & Knuckles all launching to critical and popular praise.

But despite Sonic's success in the early '90s, the franchise – and Sega as a whole – experienced a bumpy road in subsequent years. The Saturn, Sega's attempt at competing with the Nintendo 64, fell short. And the Dreamcast, despite a strong lineup of games (including the beloved Sonic Adventure titles), failed to sell comparably to Sony's PlayStation 2. Following the discontinuation of Dreamcast, Sega exited the hardware business for good, and Sonic became third-party software appearing on PlayStation, Xbox, and Nintendo platforms.

While Sonic Team creative officer Takashi Iizuka told me he was excited to develop for additional platforms and reach new audiences, the mid-to-late 2000s and early 2010s proved challenging for Sonic. While some games resonated with fans, the series became notorious for promising beyond its capabilities. Fans coined the term "The Sonic Cycle" to describe how they are continually let down by the final product after promising early marketing.

While some small successes popped up during this era – Unleashed, Colors, and Generations being the most noteworthy examples – fans lamented the end of Sonic's relevance among the platforming elite, and many succumbed to the notion that the hedgehog's best days were behind him. However, Sega was less willing to accept that idea.

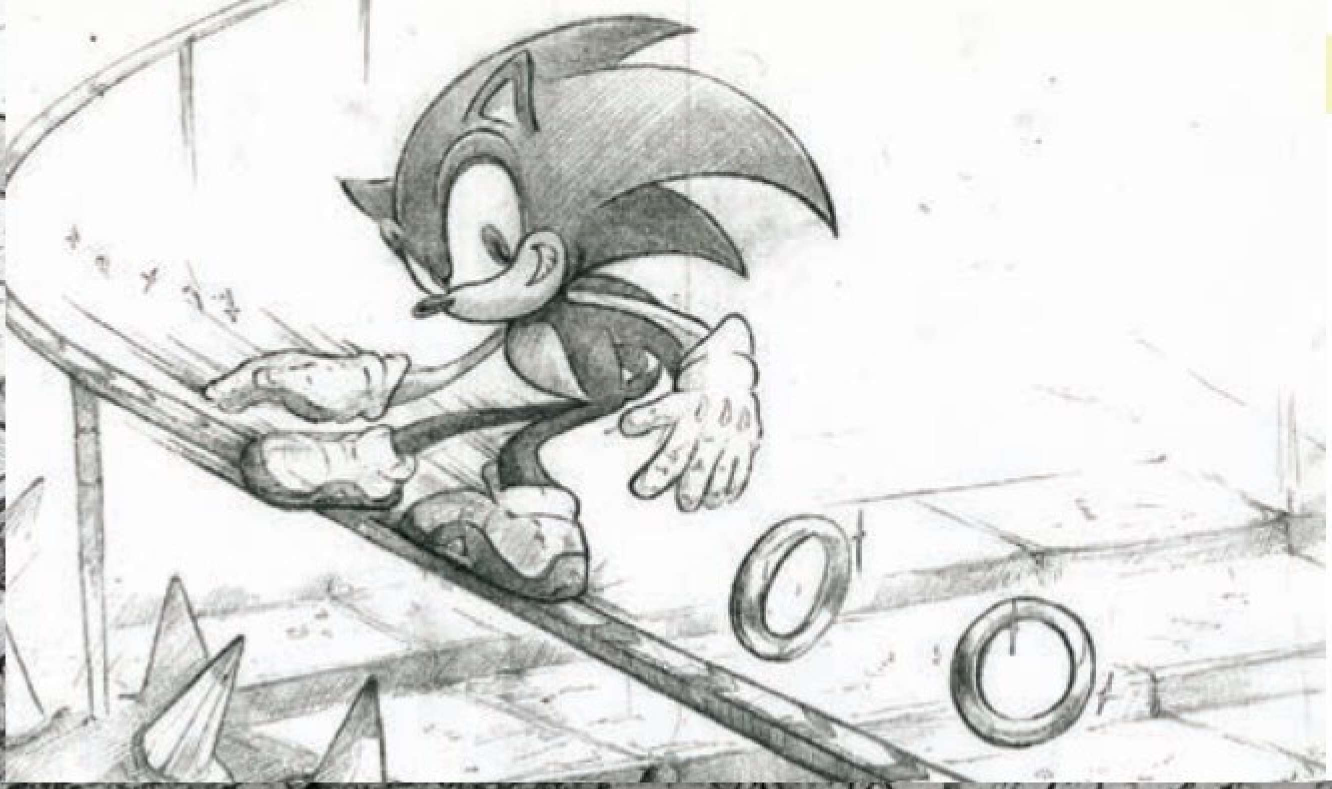
Live and Learn

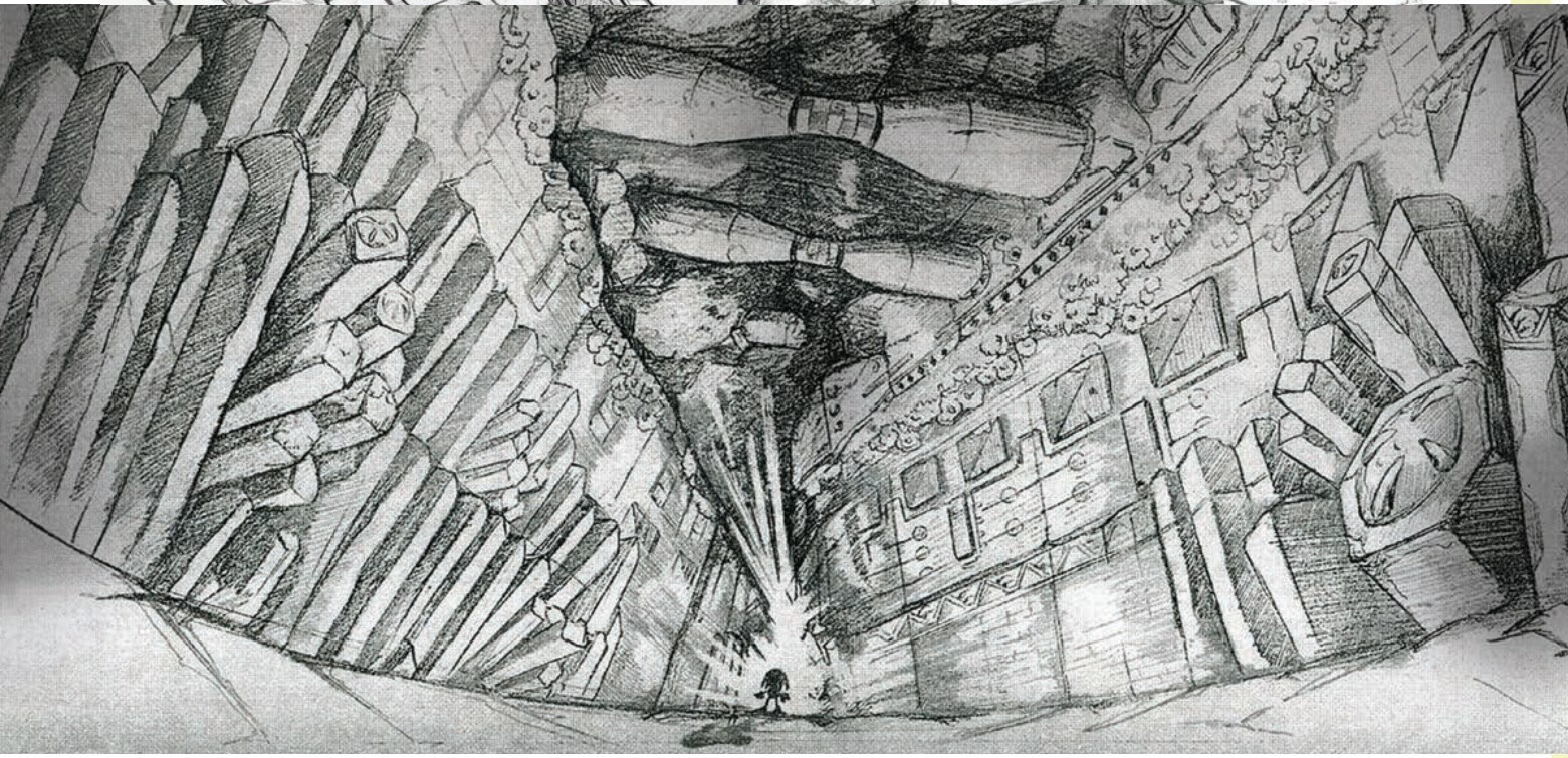
In 2015, Sega tried doing something about its track record. According to chief brand & business officer Ivo Gerscovich, who joined the company in 2015, the brand just couldn't continue down the path it was going from the '00s, particularly with the games in the Nintendo-exclusive Sonic Boom spin-off franchise. "The quality wasn't where we wanted or needed [it] to be," Gerscovich says. "We were also exclusive to one platform, and our audience potentially was a lot wider than that."

Another tension point for Sonic Team was that many members worked in different locations across the globe. Iizuka, who's headed up many Sonic Team projects over the last couple of decades, lived in Japan while much of the team was in California. The company restructured its Sonic pillar, moving much of its crew to its current headquarters in Burbank to ease the communication process. But the team knew it needed to address its unhealthy relationship with deadlines and launching games before they were ready.

"Any time a game gets the time it deserves, it's a really good thing," Gerscovich says. "That being said, there's always a lot of research and things that go on behind the scenes. There's gameplay testing, and there's focus groups, and there's obviously a very experienced production team. All of those things get factored into decisions, but definitely, Sega has moved towards a quality focus in the last years. You've heard that from the chairman [and CEO] Haruki Satomi and myself and many others. We're all doing everything possible to deliver the best experiences for fans across all platforms."

The first Sonic game Sega released after the shift was Sonic Boom: Fire & Ice for 3DS, which received a full-year delay to create a better game. Sega rarely used this approach in the prior decade, most notably with the infamous Sonic the Hedgehog (2006), which nearly skipped the entire QA process to meet a deadline. Fire & Ice didn't turn the world upside-down when it was launched in 2016, but it did show improvements over the other two Sonic Boom titles. However, despite the noticeably better product and the popular *Sonic Boom* cartoon producing new episodes for another year, Fire & Ice was the final Sonic Boom game released as the brand refocused on its core fan base.





“We had an anniversary about a year later, so we were looking for something fun to really bring back the core fans; a lot of the core fans, I think, felt alienated by Sonic Boom and those video games, and so we wanted to pivot and bring the core fans back knowing they were our bread and butter,” Gerscovich says.

In 2017, Sega released two Sonic games. The first was Sonic Mania, a loving homage to the Genesis days, created by a team of independent developers led by Christian Whitehead. “We started talking with Christian, and I’ll never forget, there was a meeting with Iizuka-san, and Christian flew in from Australia,” Gerscovich recalls. “The team was pitching the idea, and they were going back and forth, and Iizuka-san was a little bit silent. And he stepped out for a few minutes, and then he came back, and he said, ‘Why don’t we do this?’ and he basically had the idea of combining all these different games and calling it ‘Mania.’ And everyone’s jaw dropped in that moment, and we realized that we had something potentially magical.”

Sonic Mania received universal acclaim as one of the best Sonic games ever created. “When we started seeing the early builds of the game, you could already sense that there was something very special,” Gerscovich says. “It’s one of the defining moments, and the team takes a lot of pride because that immediately brought the core back, and it brought a lot of new fans.”

Unfortunately, the second Sonic game of 2017 wasn’t so well-received. Sonic Forces offered players the ability to create their character in a darker storyline involving Eggman defeating Sonic, and an underground resistance fighting back. The tale included several fan-favorite adversaries from the past, but the end of the story fell flat for fans, and many criticized the 2D gameplay, 3D level design, and short story runtime.

Sonic Forces didn’t give Sega and its flagship franchise the boost it was hoping for. However, thanks to a burgeoning multimedia scene that includes a new comic run at IDW Publishing, a live-action film franchise at Paramount, and an animated streaming series at Netflix, the past few years have been good for the hedgehog.

And now, with the benefit of seven years of course correction and lessons learned from trying to right the ship, Sega believes it is ready to capitalize on the increased brand awareness and deliver better-quality experiences. The open-world Sonic Frontiers is ambitious, engaging, and exciting, but fans have learned to distrust the hype machine thanks to the Sonic Cycle. However, after spending hours with Sonic Team’s latest project, it’s clear this is Sega’s best shot at delivering the game fans have wanted and deserved for the last two decades.

MULTIMEDIA MOMENTUM

In February 2020, Sonic experienced a massive boost in the form of a live-action movie. *Sonic the Hedgehog* may have gotten a rough start with a character design that's still the butt of jokes, but Paramount and the team behind the film rectified the situation, delaying it and redoing the character design from the ground up.

"They were absolutely right to request us to work harder and to make adjustments," director Jeff Fowler told us earlier this year. "And then to come out the other side and for everyone to be able to high five and celebrate, it felt like we ended in a place where they were happy, and the film was a film that they could embrace. Now, moving forward, it just feels like we have this really wonderful relationship with the fans."

The first Sonic movie was well-liked by critics and fans. It brought in more than $306 million at the box office before the COVID-19 pandemic truncated its stay in theaters. Sega noticed a huge influx in interest in the Sonic franchise on the heels of that first film. "Many people who had never played a Sonic game were introduced to our charismatic character," Sonic Team creative officer Takashi Iizuka says. "With the release of the movie, I could feel everyone immediately recognizing Sonic. If we look back at the historical accomplishments, we can see that both the advancements of the games as well as the expansion of the media have led us to such a successful achievement [of reaching the brand's 30-year anniversary]."

Earlier this year, Paramount released *Sonic the Hedgehog* 2, which added more characters, bigger storylines, and more star power to the cast. "After the success of the first [movie], we went to Sega and said, 'Look, we think we can do a lot more here, and we've got a pretty great roadmap for the future,'" producer Toby Ascher says. "And they've been incredible partners in buying into that roadmap."

The studio was so confident in *Sonic the Hedgehog* 2's success that it greenlit a third movie and a live-action Knuckles series for Paramount Plus before the sequel even hit theaters. That confidence was well-placed, as the second film received higher critical and audience reviews than the first and became the top-grossing video game movie of all time in the U.S. and brought in more than $392 million worldwide. With *Sonic* 2 available now on digital storefronts and Paramount Plus, and the Blu-ray and DVD coming on August 9, even more fans are likely discovering the live-action success of the Sonic.

For Paramount, the success has been a result of close collaboration with the team at Sega. "We try and learn from what they've learned in the 30 years of making games and working with this brand," Ascher says. "And they've been really good about listening to us when we say, 'I know this is something that you said you could never do with Sonic, but for a movie, we might need to change that slightly,' and that back and forth with a motto of 'best idea wins' is how we've made these movies."

As Paramount's Sonic cinematic franchise speeds into the future with multiple projects in the works, the studio has high hopes for the heights it can reach. "Our goal is to tell great stories that capture the feelings of the game but expand outward," Ascher says."One of the things we realized as we were in [*Sonic* 2] is all of a sudden, we have this incredible roster of characters, and to be able to continue on and tell great Knuckles stories, great Tails stories, great Shadow stories, we might just need a little more road than we have in one movie. That's one of the reasons for expanding outward: We really feel like some of these characters – like Shadow and Knuckles – they deserve a great, multi-layered story, and we're excited to bring those."

In addition to the Paramount film series, Sonic also has a new animated series hitting Netflix later this year. *Sonic Prime* is currently in development by WildBrain Studios, which has worked on animated revivals of series like *Snoopy*, *Strawberry Shortcake*, and *The Proud Family*. However, according to WildBrain senior vice president of creative, Logan McPherson, Sonic is a special brand for the studio.

"Whether it was the new feature films, the earlier cartoons, or the classic or modern games, the crew's affinity for Sonic spanned the entire spectrum of the property," he says. "What was amazing was how this passion drove the crew's conversations about how to portray certain aspects and how that influenced the show itself. Things like how to animate attack moves by Sonic or special abilities from other characters, like Knuckles' ability to glide and spin dash – all these amazing ideas that fans will see in the series came from impassioned crew conversations."

That passion gives fans hope the studio will deliver loyal portrayals of the characters and storylines they love. Thankfully, Netflix is also on board with providing that same experience. "[Sonic's] fantastic, and we want to ensure that we showcase the Sonic that fans know and love to our audience," Netflix animation executive Megan Casey says. "Our goal was to honor the core of the franchise while delivering an epic scope to his adventure – something that the creative team assembled by Sega and WildBrain have done brilliantly in both story and visuals."

Escape from the City

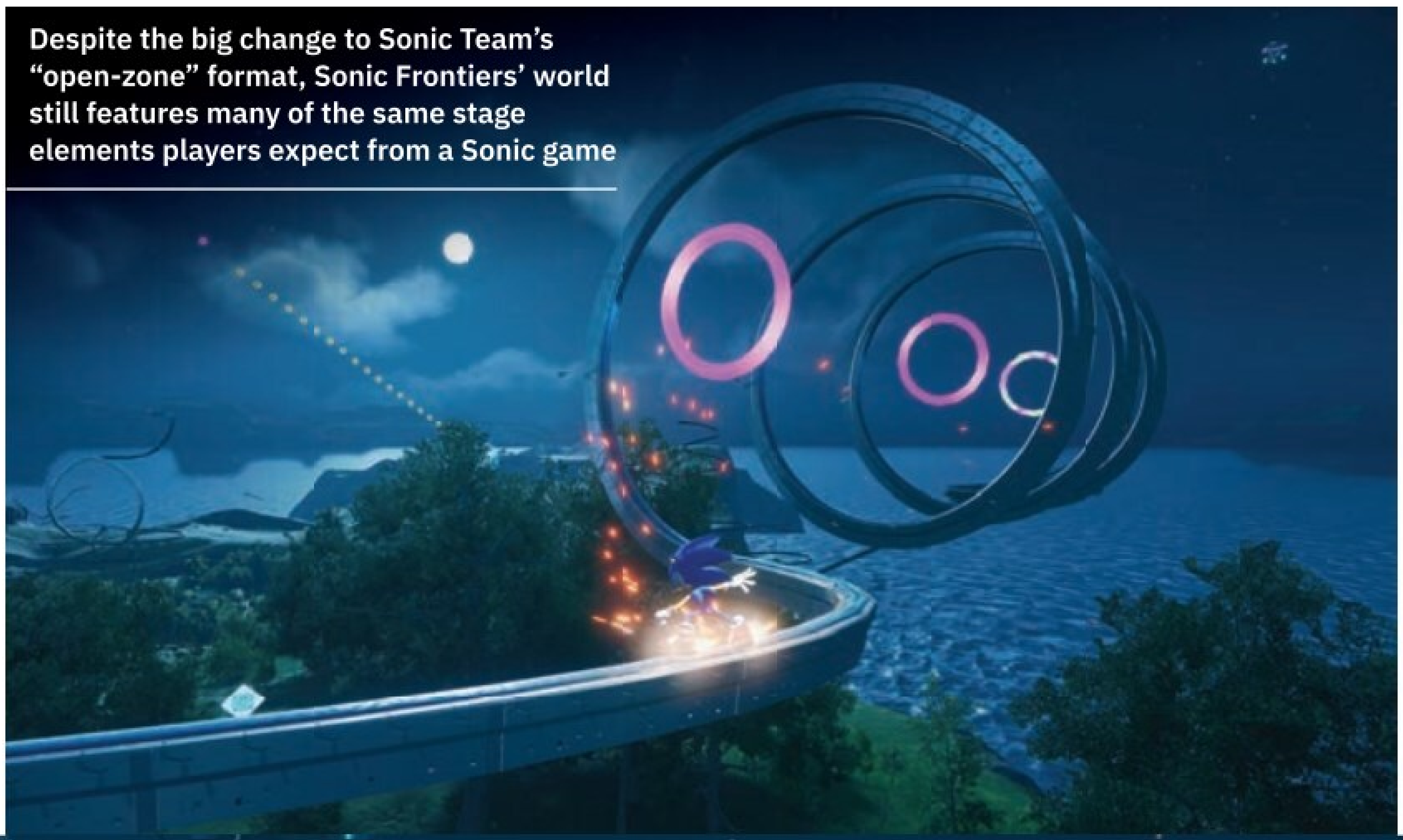
True to the hedgehog's love of speed, Sonic Frontiers wastes little time setting the table for the adventure to come. In the first of two cutscenes, Dr. Eggman arrives on an isolated island and approaches a mysterious artifact. He places a device on the artifact and begins uploading his A.I. "The ancient secrets will be mine!" he excitedly exclaims. However, the island already has its own A.I. (or something like it). A voice from the artifact activates its protection protocol, absorbing Eggman into the object.

The scene cuts away from the mustachioed villain's apparent defeat, and I see a familiar sight: the *Tornado* biplane approaching the island. The scene immediately recalls the introduction to Sonic the Hedgehog 3, but with a few clear distinctions. First, Amy Rose is along for the ride, joining Sonic and Tails on this endeavor. Additionally, they aren't approaching Angel Island, but rather Starfall Islands. And finally, Sonic isn't going to jump off and turn into Super Sonic; in fact, he doesn't have any of the seven Chaos Emeralds. Instead, that's precisely what brings the trio to these islands: They're tracking those mystical gems.

The skies are clear and smooth as Sonic, Tails, and Amy approach, but the peace doesn't last long. Tails loses control of the plane, and they fly into a wormhole. When Sonic awakens, he recognizes his surroundings, but something is slightly off. The area where he landed is reminiscent of one of his most familiar locales: Green Hill Zone. Sonic Frontiers has been shown to be open world, but this first sequence is entirely linear.

Though I'm confused at first, I use the stage to get a feel for how Sonic controls in Frontiers. Running through Green Hill, blasting through iconic Badniks like Motobugs who roam the fields, feels as good as ever. Sonic is smooth and fast but not unwieldy. His jumping is precise, aided as always by his useful homing attack, but without feeling like it slows down his momentum. It turns out this excursion to Green Hill Zone is not only a quick detour but also a tutorial. I finish this linear stage in less than a minute and feel good about how the hedgehog controls in linear sequences, but the true test will be in how he adapts to the open world.

After a results screen that shows how I did in stage 1-1, Sonic awakens alone and disoriented. A disembodied voice calls out to the bewildered Sonic. After reacting to Sonic doing "the impossible," escaping from what it calls "Cyber Space," it delivers clear, concise instructions: Find the Chaos Emeralds and destroy the Titans. Since Sonic was already trying to track down his favorite gems, he figures this is as good of guidance as any. "Some direction is better than none," he says with a shrug, and he speeds off into Kronos Island.



Despite the big change to Sonic Team's "open-zone" format, Sonic Frontiers' world still features many of the same stage elements players expect from a Sonic game

His World

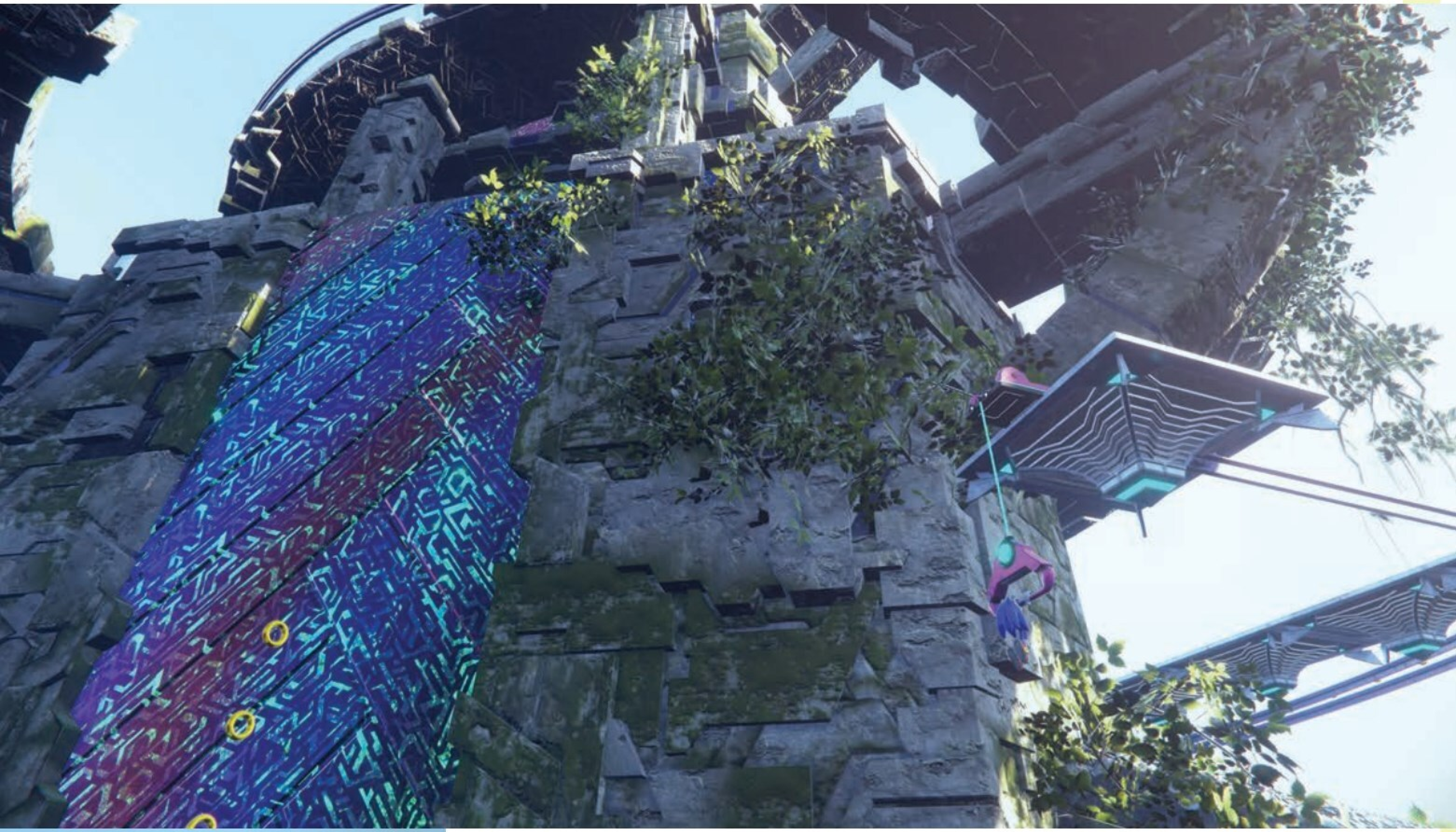
After that quick detour through Cyber Space, Frontiers drops me into Kronos Island's open world (or, as Sonic Team calls it, "open zone"). The tight controls I experienced in the tutorial feel even better now that I can freely explore.

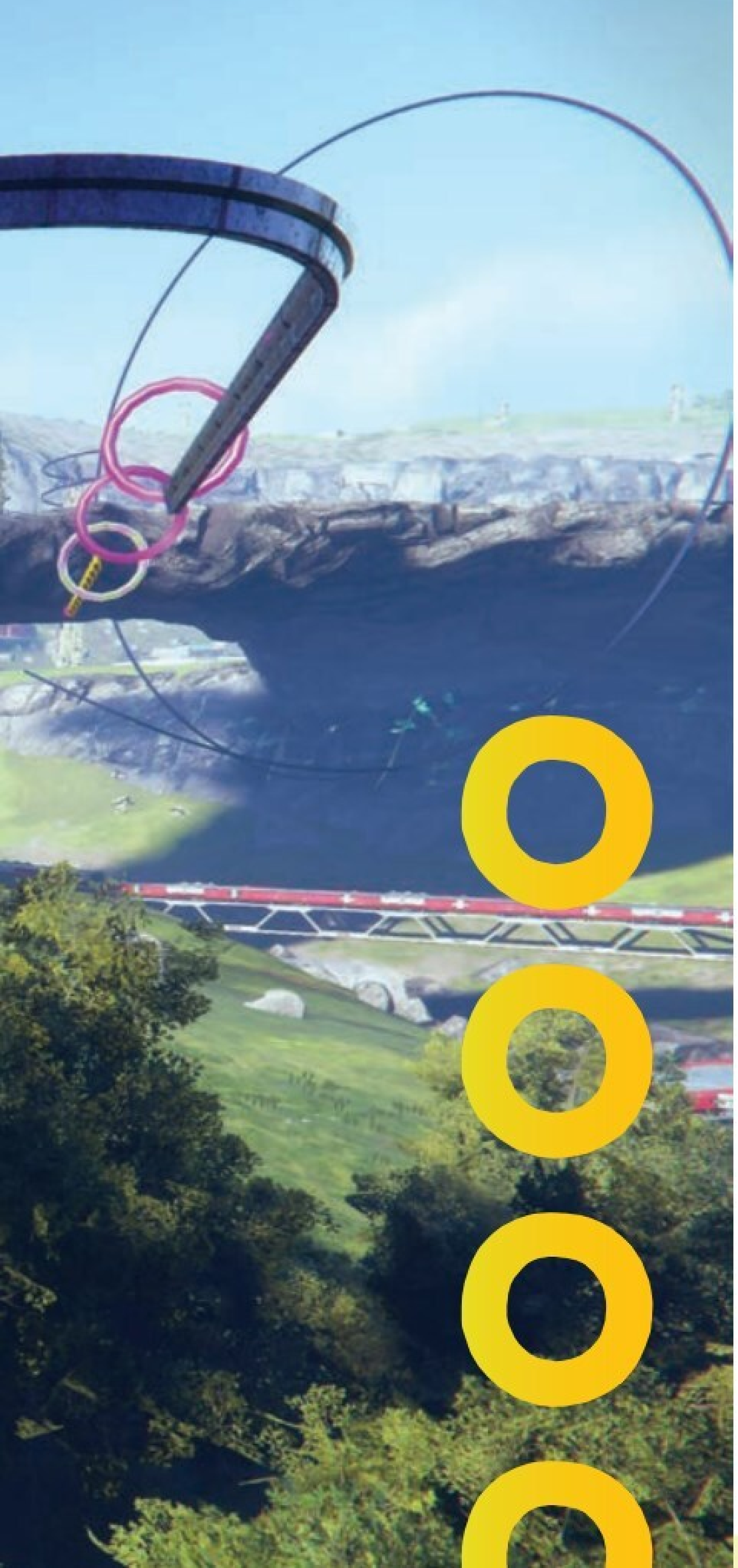
"With previous 3D Sonic games, it was difficult to give the players freedom," Iizuka says. "That's because you need a path to provide a high-speed experience, and you could only play on that path. The open-zone concept gets rid of that path and provides an action experience with freedom."

After getting the hang of the camera controls and Sonic's open-zone movement, I stumble upon an obelisk-style shrine. These pillars serve as portals to the more traditional Cyber Space stages, like the Green Hill one I played for my tutorial. I decide to keep exploring Kronos Island instead.

Coming into my hands-on time, I worried about how Sonic would control in the open zone. I imagined scenarios where the hedgehog would be too slippery, too fast, or flat-out too imprecise to truly take advantage of the game's exploration elements. After all, one of the biggest appeals to the open world in games like The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild is how rewarding methodical exploration and investigation proves. Zipping through the open area of the island again feels speedy but controlled.

This feeling results from a ton of experimentation and iteration from Sonic Team to transition the franchise away from linearity. "We've been building high-speed action on a path for more than 20 years, so it wasn't easy to get rid of it," Iizuka says. "For example, it's like taking F1 racing and getting rid of the course to drive on a wide, flat plain. That wouldn't be any fun, would it? So, in the early stages of the project, we kept creating the island terrain where the game would be set over and over in search of the ideal open zone."



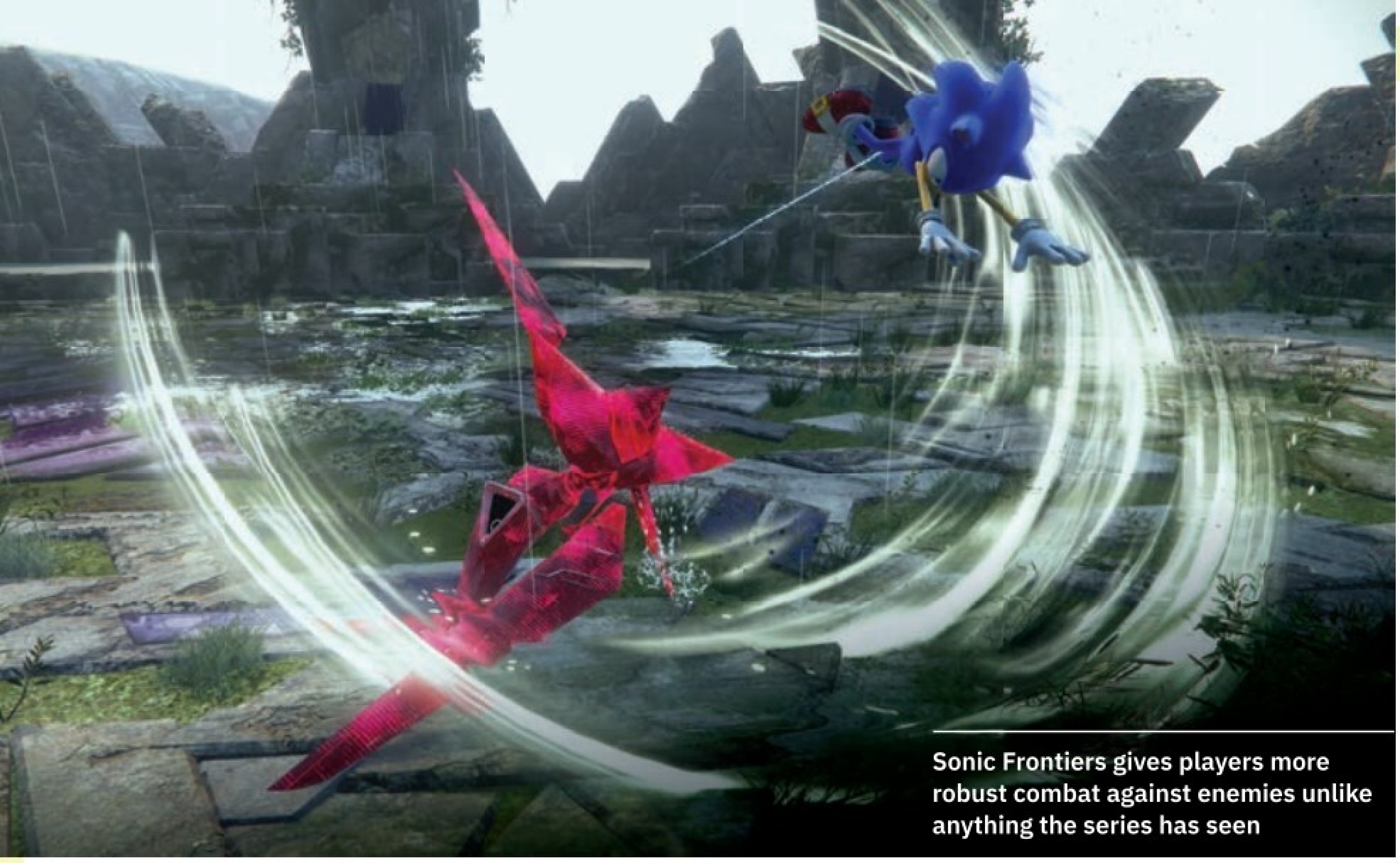


Exploration elements reminiscent of the most successful open-world titles remain intact as I find a basic switch-based puzzle. By activating each switch, I solve the puzzle and remove the clouds covering that portion of the map. I take the opportunity to see what else this game has to offer. I zoom out on the map, revealing the massive scope of Kronos Island. With Sonic able to move across the world at such breakneck speeds, the map needs to be significant to deliver enough content for the hedgehog to explore. Thankfully, this initial glance at the map and subsequent exploration quell any concerns I had that Sonic would be able to speed across too quickly.

Another concern I had was that the world would be too empty. Early glimpses at the game heightened those concerns, but as I play more, the spacing of the enemies makes sense with how quickly Sonic moves through the environment. Enemy encounters feel balanced in their pacing, and the puzzles, collectibles, and discoveries feel appropriately divvied out over my hourslong playtime.

One of Sonic Team's focuses was the criticism that recent games have been too short. With Frontiers, players won't have to worry about that. "Whenever we work on the concept for a new game, we always refer to the reaction to the previous games and user feedback, so there are a lot of lessons, but one of them would be playthrough time," Iizuka says. "The playthrough times ended up being short for the previous games, but due to the open zone and other factors, there has been a substantial improvement this time."

While I'm checking out the scale of the world, I decide to look at nearby points of interest. As I reveal more of the map by completing these environmental puzzles and challenges, I learn the locations of destinations such as Cyber Space portals, collectibles, and boss fights. However, this is a Sonic game built on exploration and speed. I don't want to be in and out of my map the whole time, so I opt to use the waypoint and directional navigation systems permanently positioned at the top of the screen to minimize my time in menus.



Sonic Frontiers gives players more robust combat against enemies unlike anything the series has seen

Running through the world, I spot an icon featuring two crossed swords, indicating a boss battle. I decide that's my destination. En route, enemies populate the world. The creatures assaulting me appear to be a combination of organic and robotic components. I quickly close the distance to individual enemies with the homing attack button. Once in tight, I push that same button for a combo consisting of kicks and punches. These enemies are basic and easily defeated, but later enemies require more tactical approaches.

"In addition to high-speed action, the other big part of Sonic Frontiers is fighting enemies," Iizuka says. "In previous Sonic games, combat was kind of like an accent that gave the high-speed action a sense of rhythm. This time, we're adding a greater sense of tension and tactics to the combat. All of the enemies have been designed based on tactics."

I dispatch the creatures and receive skill pieces and seeds, which I can use to strengthen Sonic in different ways. Skill pieces contribute to a meter as you collect them, providing you with a skill point each time you fill it. To grant additional benefits, I can trade the seeds I find to mysterious creatures known as Kocos, who inhabit the island. If I find a special type of Koco, I can trade seeds to improve Sonic's attack or defense. Unfortunately, I haven't yet found any special Kocos, and while I don't have enough pieces for a skill point, that first encounter gave me an excellent head start.

Continuing through the world on the way to the boss battle, I notice all the level-design conventions fans expect from a traditional Sonic game – rails, springs, lines of rings – transposed into this open-zone format. By clicking the stick, I perform the lightspeed dash move introduced in Sonic Adventure, sending the Blue Blur along the line of rings. Sonic Team uses this to significant effect in exploration, giving me plenty of ring lines to dash along to reach new areas.

After grinding some rails, I arrive in the clearing marked by the "formidable enemy" icon. I find a Ninja, an imposing robot with blades for arms. I try rushing in as I did with the initial batch of enemies, but the Ninja isn't having it. After using the homing attack to get close, I land a couple of quick melee attacks, but it loads up and slashes Sonic, sending him and many of the rings I collected flying. These world bosses are often bigger than the standard enemies and have unique attack patterns you need to study.

The Ninja has a decent health bar and is quicker than I expected, but Sonic is still faster. It destructively dances around the clearing, spinning its blades in a deadly display. While keeping my distance, I notice an opening after the Ninja's spinning ceases. I home in on the boss and string together another combo, chipping away at the health bar. I repeat this process a couple more times, dodging incoming attacks and landing effective combos until the foe erupts into a glorious purple blast. Bosses leave behind Portal Gears, granting me access to additional Cyber Space levels. Defeating this particular Ninja opens a massive door, inviting me to a previously unreachable part of the map.

Blue Streak Speeds By

I storm through the newly opened gate, immediately finding a platforming sequence rewarding me with rings and a seed. A new puzzle also awaits, this time focused on rotating statues to face the correct way. After solving this still-basic task, another door opens, and I receive a message that I can now unlock Sonic's Cyloop ability.

While Sonic has long had adventures where he obtains abilities throughout the game, Sonic Frontiers expands the concept by implementing a complete skill tree – the first of its kind in a Sonic game. "Starting out with Sonic at full power would make the combat simple and repetitive, so we made it so the player gradually unlocks Sonic's abilities through the skill tree," Iizuka says. "The player collects the points necessary to unlock skills by defeating enemies and exploring the island, so they can unlock more powerful skills by playing longer."

Throughout the campaign, you can unlock abilities like Sonic Boom (shoot projectile blades mid-combo), Wild Crash (run towards enemies with a zig-zag pattern to avoid their attacks), and Accel Rush

(increased power when you max out your combo meter). The tree also features hidden skills you unlock as you progress in the main story.

After checking out the skills I'll have access to in the future, I use my available skill point to obtain Sonic's Cyloop ability. This move, when activated, leaves a blue band of light behind him while moving. If you make a complete circle, you can trigger various effects. For example, closing a Cyloop circle in the middle of a field spawns rings, while doing it around particular objects in the environment causes unique interactions; in my next puzzle, I use the Cyloop to extinguish a set of torches simultaneously.

When the next batch of enemies spawn, I run a circle around them and deal area-of-effect damage with this new move; it's not terribly powerful, but it helps with crowd control. Later on, you can unlock the ability to quickly and automatically draw a Cyloop circle, which sounds like it would come in handy in battle. But that's not something I'll see today.

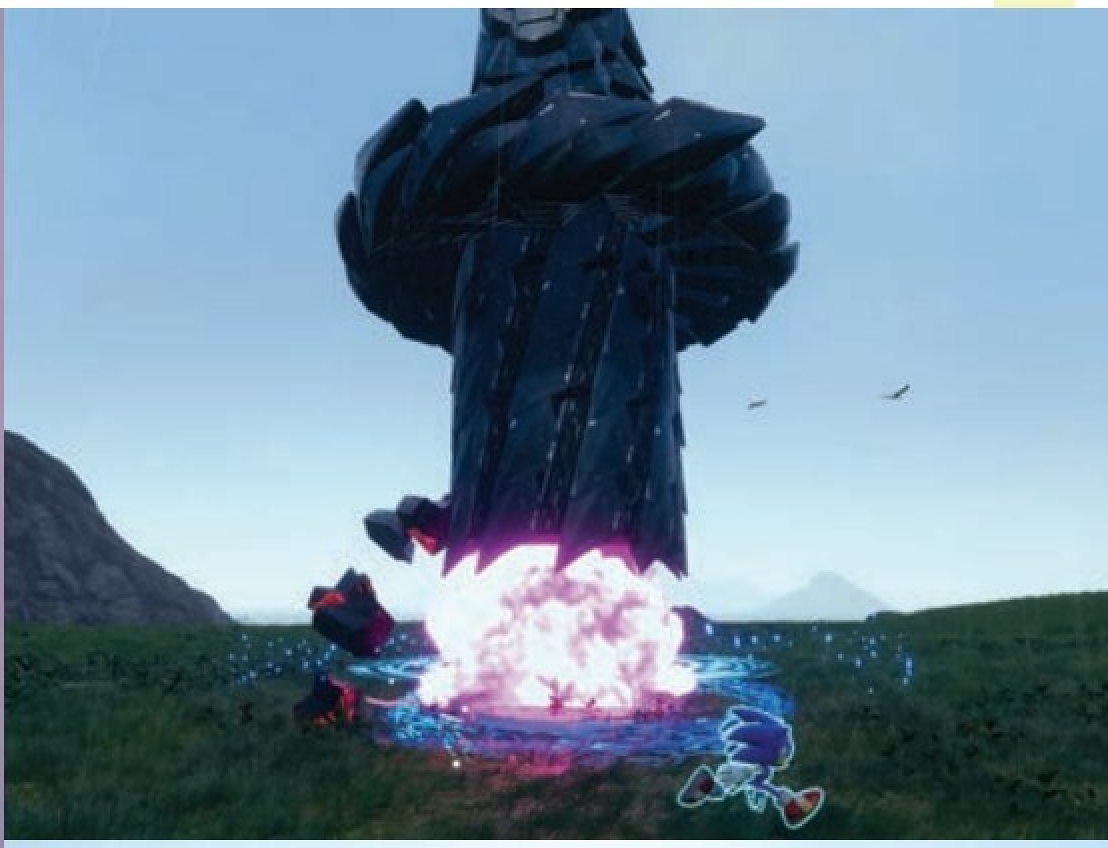
As I open more areas in the world, I notice that stage elements like springs and rails populate. While Sonic is already moving through the world faster than any other character in an open-world game I've played, these elements help traverse the world quickly without removing you from the immersion through things like traditional, menu-based fast travel.

Kronos Island delivers discoveries at a rapid clip. Moments after solving that puzzle and unlocking Cyloop, I find another Cyber Space portal. It asks me if I want to access it using my Portal Gears, but I don't have enough. Luckily, this realization is met with a seemingly serendipitous encounter as a tall, imposing boss falls from the sky. This boss, appropriately named Tower, is made up of several segments. It flings projectiles my way, but I can approach it by running in its direction and dodging to the left and right with the shoulder buttons. Once I reach it, I pull off a combo on one of the segments to destroy that piece of the boss and make it just a little shorter.

After knocking it down a notch (literally), it begins floating around. Now, I must chase it while it attacks. Eventually, I catch up to it and take out the next piece of the Tower, causing it to shrink again. The systematic nature of this boss, where Sonic must destroy it piece by piece, is supremely satisfying, and it reminds me of the Egg Rocket boss from Sonic the Hedgehog 3's Launch Base Zone. Like with that boss, I keep attacking the Tower, and once I obliterate it, I'm rewarded with enough Portal Gears to access Cyber Space once again.

This Cyber Space stage, 1-2, is seemingly inspired by Sonic Unleashed. There are a ton of rails to grind on, plus several Eggman Robots to blast through. I'm given a Vault Key as my reward. This new type of key is used on Chaos Emerald Vaults. I open my map immediately upon coming back to the real world and mark the nearest Chaos Emerald Vault with a waypoint.

After arriving at the Vault and obtaining the emerald, the world opens a lot more. Everything to this point was essentially a tutorial; a message pops on the screen letting me know I'm free to explore the island. With the missions of discovering portals, solving puzzles to reveal the map, and obtaining more Chaos Emeralds, I speed off into Kronos Island with a new sense of freedom.



Falling Free in the Wind

I decide I should track down more bosses to unlock additional Cyber Space portals. However, on my way to the one I marked on the map, I spot a familiar face: Amy! Sonic runs up to her, but she's trapped, seemingly in Cyber Space. A cutscene shows the back of a mysterious character watching from the distance as Sonic learns he must gather collectible items related to the characters throughout the world to free his friends from Cyber Space. For Amy, that collectible is hearts.

"Sonic's goal is to help his missing friends, so he'll be working toward that goal throughout the game," Iizuka says. "And as the mysteries and history of the island are gradually revealed, he will be drawn into a different, larger goal."

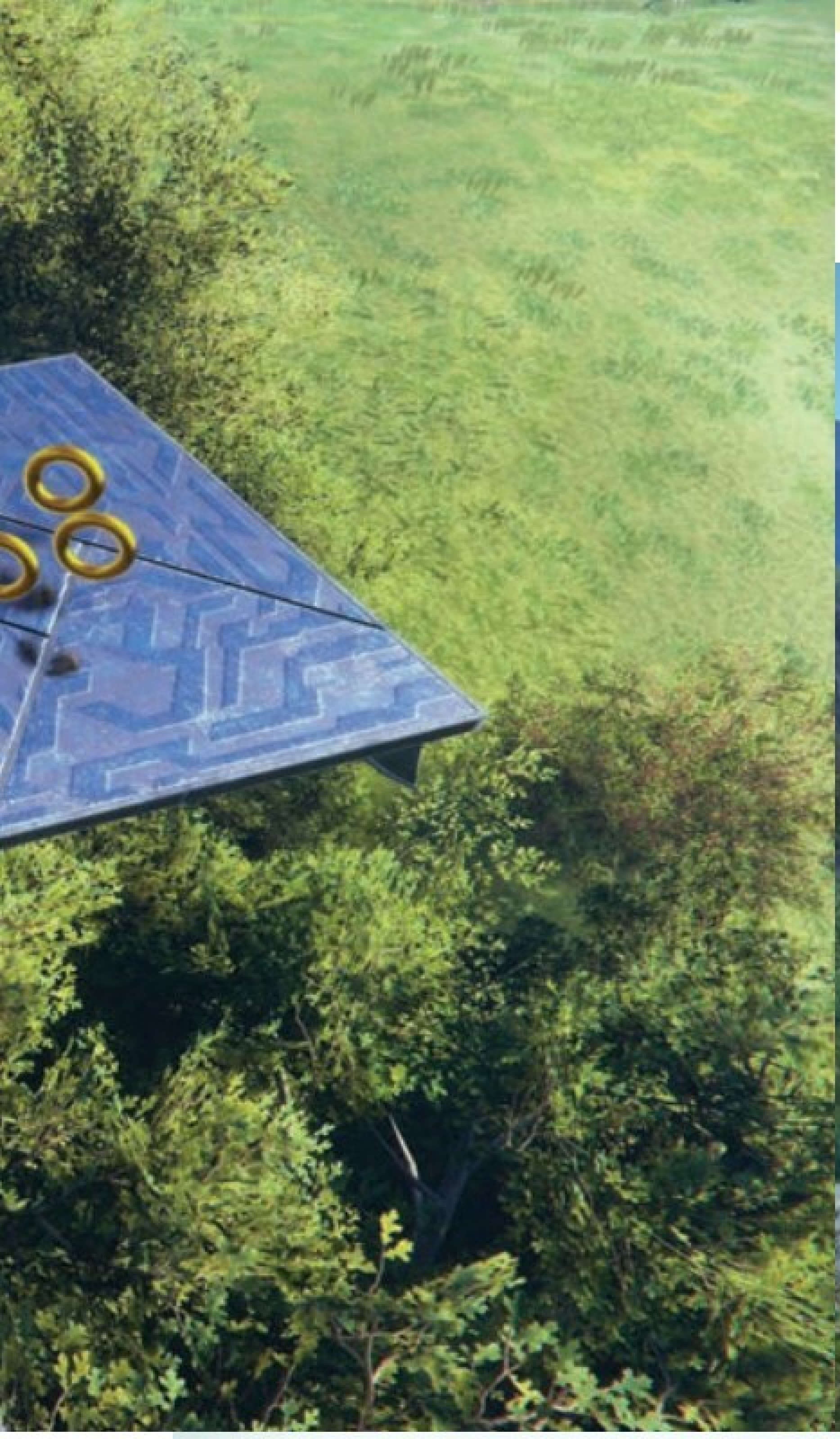
The story of Sonic Frontiers is written by Ian Flynn, who's been writing fan-favorite *Sonic the Hedgehog* comics across two publishers (first Archie and now IDW) since 2006. "Ian has been working as a comic writer for a long time, so I was very familiar with his work, but after reading the IDW comics, I was even more impressed with his talent," Iizuka says. "That's why I wanted to ask him to work on the story for the game. He knows the characters well, so he brought a great improvement to the characters' emotions and dialogue."

Flynn also drops in various references to other games in the series. According to Iizuka, these short voice lines, such as one where Sonic talks about how Kronos Island would be a great location for a Chao Garden, are meant to establish that not only is this a continuation of the Sonic story we know from previous titles but that it's the latest game on the Sonic timeline.

Following the Amy cutscene, I begin seeking out hearts, which are scattered throughout Kronos Island. I pick up the nearby collectibles, but I have unfinished business in the area: a boss battle. And nothing could have prepared me for the sheer scale of what I'm about to confront: Asura, a beast the size of a building. The massive monster slams its arm into the ground, but I dodge it. While it's grounded, I run up its limb to reach the top. While there, I land a combo on a spire on its head, causing it to crumble. Asura doesn't much like that, so it violently shakes, sending Sonic flying off the top. I repeat this for the other two spires. Each time, the ascent becomes more difficult thanks to additional obstacles on the arm. After several botched attempts on the final spire, I'm able to take down the leviathan.

With that victory, I can enter Cyber Space 1-3. This metropolis-style stage is tougher than the previous ones, but it's full of familiar elements like spikes, drops, springs, and rails. After making it through the level, the results screen delivers extra keys based on additional objectives like achieving an S-Rank, finishing with a set number of rings, hitting a specific completion time, or collecting all the Red Star rings in the stage. This run wasn't my best effort, but I do manage to come away with two extra keys. This gameplay loop of tracking down bosses, entering Cyber Space, and earning progress towards keys emerges as one of the prominent parts of Sonic Frontiers' early hours, but it's far from all you can do.

Following 1-3, a cutscene plays, showing Eggman stuck in Cyber Space. As he tries to figure out how to get out of this digital prison, the scene flashes to Sonic in his own predicament. An enormous Titan looms over our blue hero. A childlike character (possibly the one from the earlier cutscene with Amy) appears to Sonic and warns him not to attack the Titan. Sonic fails to heed the warning, and the headstrong hedgehog hurtles at it. With no effort at all, the Titan sends Sonic soaring in the opposite direction; he's clearly no match. Sonic realizes he needs the Chaos Emeralds if he's going to stand a chance against something so powerful.



Endless Possibility

I continue my mission from before, collecting Portal Gears by defeating bosses so I can enter Cyber Space and earn Vault Keys. During my time exploring these Cyber Space stages, I play through a Chemical Plant Zone-inspired stage and another that takes its design and thematic inspiration from Green Hill. However, that's not all that happens. I encounter another familiar face in one portal: Big the Cat.

The friend to Froggy is ready with his fishing rod and teaches me how to take part in Sonic Frontiers' fishing minigame. Landing my first fish adds a token to my inventory. With this new currency, I can buy various items like Portal Gear fragments, voice diaries, Vault Keys, or even the sequence items like Amy's heart collectible. In the future, I'll need to give Big purple coins from around the world to get additional chances to fish. I don't waste too much time in the portal, but I make a mental note to keep an eye open for purple coins; it seems like that shop he's running could come in handy.

Part of the aforementioned Sonic Cycle is that additional characters appear alongside Sonic in the adventure, but we shouldn't expect to see too many of these friends in Frontiers. "Sonic sets out alone to find his missing friends, but this is an undeveloped land that no one has visited before, so we won't be seeing a huge cast of characters," Iizuka says.

Between Cyber Space portals, I encounter a Hermit Koco. Finally, all those seeds I've been collecting will pay off. By trading seeds to Hermit Kocos, you can decide between bolstering your strength or defense. I choose to load up on strength, giving Sonic more powerful homing attacks and combos. Later, I find an Elder Koco, who enhances your ring limit or increases Sonic's top speed if you return lost Kocos from across Kronos Island. With the Elder Koco, I opt to dial Sonic's speed up. It might not be as noticeable as his boost in attack power, but every little bit helps when you're exploring such a large island. In addition, the world might help you get around quickly with rails and springs as you expand the map, but if you want some good, old-fashioned menu-based fast travel, you can warp to the Hermit and Elder Kocos you find on the map.

Speaking of traveling, those earlier bosses aren't the only hostile creatures I encounter while exploring the island. I confront a few different enemy types around the area where I battled the Asura. One type is spherical and covered with blob-like armor, with an electric current that activates if you get near. To take it down, you need to land successive combos when it's not electrically charged and before it can regenerate its armor. Another is a heavily armored creature that appears completely impenetrable, but that initial assumption proves false once I try using Cyloop on it. Finally, a wheel-like enemy rolls towards Sonic, and while it doesn't appear much of a threat on the surface, it explodes if you give it too much time or defeat it.

I also find another Ninja in the world. While the first encounter was a bit of a challenge as I was still grasping the controls, this battle is a breeze. The ease of this fight is mainly due to me having a couple more hours of gameplay under my belt and because I just learned how to execute a parry. If I time the parry just right with the Ninja's incoming attack, Sonic counters and unleashes a monster combo that wipes out a good portion of the boss' health bar. After that, all that's left to do is clean up the meager remaining amount of health before continuing with my missions.

Before moving too far away, I find a stockpile of Eggman tech. I'm not sure what purpose it serves aside from informing Sonic that his archnemesis is lurking somewhere, but for now, it's useless to me. Instead, I explore the giant rail playground suspended above. There, I rack up a stockpile of rings and add several of Amy's hearts to my collection. Each time I hit new heart-collection milestones, I get new cutscenes and missions progressing that portion of the story.

Eggman is featured in several story sequences, but how he fits into the broader narrative remains to be seen

The missions Amy gives me are simple enough (I found collecting the hearts around the world the most challenging part), but the last task during my hands-on time takes a few attempts. Amy's mission chain centers around helping the Kocos of Kronos Island. The final one I play involves shepherding several lost Kocos back to their mother. However, there's a twist: You must avoid getting hit by explosions and complete it before time expires. I don't herd enough of them to the mother in time on one attempt, and on the second attempt, I get hit with three explosions, ending my run. On the third attempt, I'm able to push the Kocos to their mom and complete the mission. I receive another Chaos Emerald for my trouble and also a new cutscene. I won't spoil anything, but it involves further unraveling the mysteries of the island and some major hints that things might not be how they seem.

As I gather more hearts, I find a different kind of puzzle. After using Cyloop to activate it, I need to blast a ball through a hoop with my homing attack. Meanwhile, another one gives me a timer and a destination on the top of a giant structure that I need to reach. I quickly achieve the former; I've been honing my homing skills since Sonic Adventure on Dreamcast, but the latter puzzle took me a few attempts. I found the recipe for success uses one of Sonic's most exciting traversal skills: the wall run. Sonic can climb up particular walls, but why crawl when you can sprint? It's easier to make a mistake, but a lot faster than climbing.

While I'm at the top of the giant structure, I glimpse the sprawling island. I spot many varied areas I won't have enough time to explore during my hands-on session.

There are so many mysteries on Kronos Island, from more towering buildings to additional portals to an area that appears to be a giant symbolic disc-shaped platform held up by a cable system. With not much time left before saying goodbye to Frontiers, I decide to pursue the most exciting thing I saw atop that structure: a new boss type.

This creature is known as a Flyer. It soars through the world like a dragon with a long tail behind it. I guide Sonic onto its tail, which serves as a runway to dash along. Since it also acts as a treadmill of sorts, Sonic must use his speed, and I must use my reflexes to dodge the blasters it sends my way. If I can avoid enough attacks and land my own, the boss touches down nearby, and the battle becomes an arena-style fight. I need to dodge lasers again, but this time in a stationary, traditional boss battle.

The Flyer gave me a run for my money, but it was one of my favorite moments from my time with Sonic Frontiers. The bosses I encountered in the world are diverse and eclectic in the ways you must approach them. If the creatures I faced are any indication, this world houses many fun things to find as you speed through the beautiful open zone.

Give Us a Reason and We're On Our Way

Even after hours with Frontiers, there are still many questions I can't help but ponder. I have no idea what's going on with Kronos Island and the mysterious creatures that inhabit it, how the story will progress, or how Eggman fits into all of this, but I'm relentlessly intrigued.

Should Sonic Frontiers prove successful, fans should expect more titles in this open-zone style. According to Iizuka, the goal of this project from the start was "to evolve the linear, stage-clearing 3D action that began with Sonic Adventure in 1998 and create a game that would be the cornerstone of future Sonic games."

While we won't know how this game will turn out until later this year or if the open-zone concept truly is the future of the Sonic franchise, the first title that utilizes it shows more potential than I can recall for any 3D Sonic game. If Sonic Frontiers delivers, the future is once again bright for Sega's flagship franchise. ■

To learn more about Sonic Frontiers, the new open-zone format, and how Sonic reemerged as one of the biggest names in gaming, head to GameInformer.com/SonicFrontiers

A NEW DESTINAT

How Open Roads changed direction and saved its turbulent road trip

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

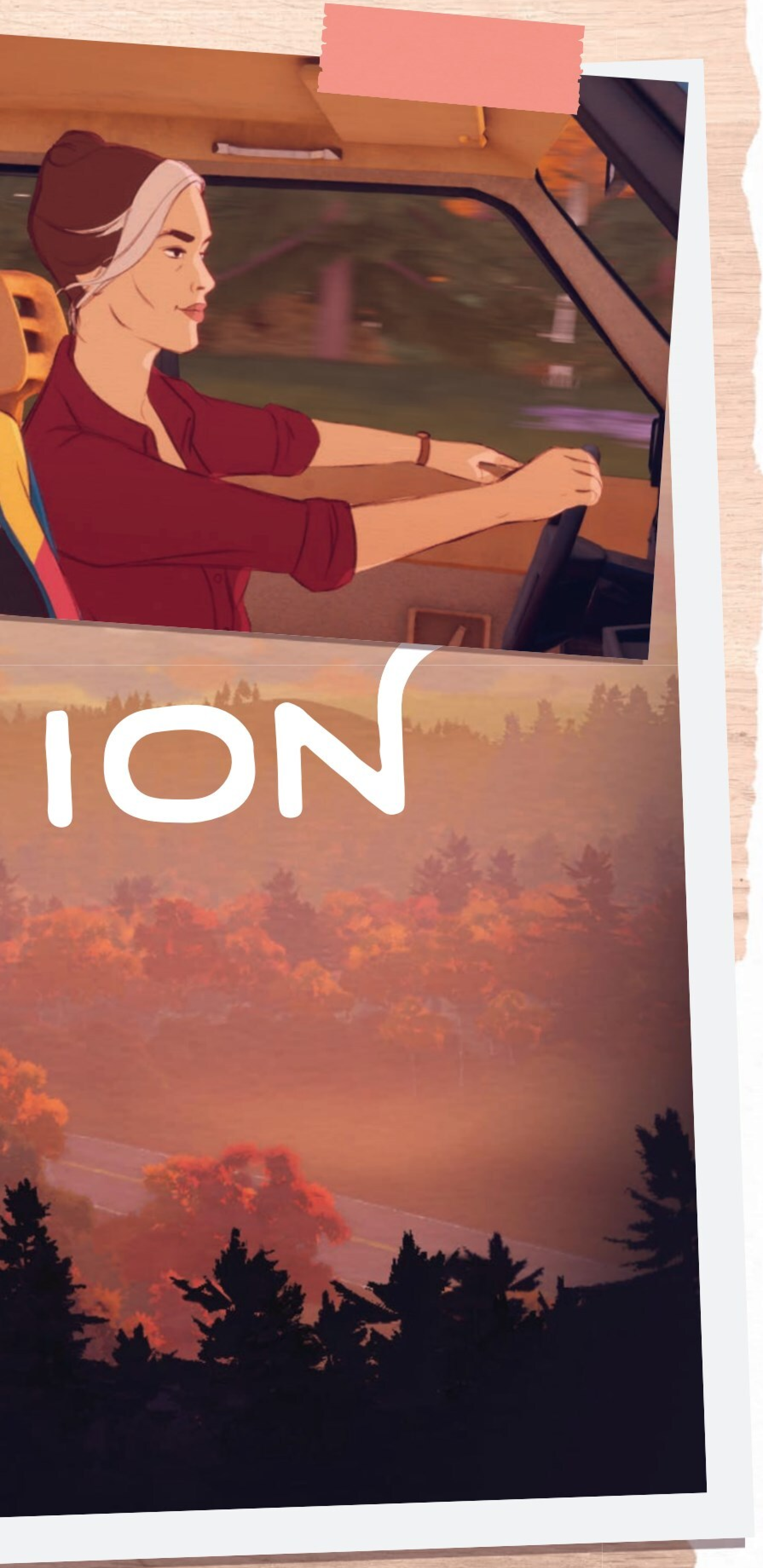
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

STYLE 1-Player Adventure

PUBLISHER Annapurna Interactive

DEVELOPER Fullbright

RELEASE TBA



Every road trip has bumps along the way – unexpected potholes, constant traffic, and extra pit stops. There are stretches of nothingness, and your numb mind tries to pass the time until you reach the destination. Sometimes the open road instills a sense of freedom; other times, you feel trapped. However, the memories that help us power through the tedium often stick – singing along to a classic, having a heart-to-heart conversation, or observing a surprising sight.

In creating a game about a road trip, you could say Gone Home developer Fullbright experienced these highs and lows at every turn. Two years ago, the debut trailer for its third game, Open Roads, was met with excitement. And rightfully so, as it centered on a mother and daughter's journey to discover more behind their family history – a different set of protagonists than we usually see in our video game adventures. The hand-drawn art style popped, but it also turned heads for the top-tier talent cast in the two leading roles: Keri Russell (*The Americans*, *Star Wars: Episode IX - The Rise of Skywalker*) and Kaitlyn Dever (*Booksmart*, *Dopesick*).

The reveal got people talking, and a year later, people were talking again – but for more complicated and alarming reasons. Multiple allegations of employee mistreatment surfaced against Fulbright co-founder and Open Roads creative director Steve Gaynor, causing him to step down from the project. Outside of the concern for a healthy working atmosphere and the employees that suffered, many questioned if Open Roads would survive the turmoil and not get lost in the wreckage of Gaynor's negative actions.

A small team wanted to ensure it didn't, staying on and finishing the game. However, they knew some big changes needed to be made on the game and how the studio collaborated on projects. They needed to put the studio's previous, damaging leadership style in the rearview mirror.

This is how they got back on the road and found a new route to their destination.

Changing the Plan

Open Roads could not continue development as it was. The studio's bureaucratic structure was hurting everyone involved, and the best option was to remove Gaynor altogether. That wasn't the simplest decision as he owns Fullbright. When news of Gaynor's harmful management hit, the Open Roads team posted a statement on Twitter. It stated Gaynor would step down as creative director and transition to a writer on the project. However, that's no longer the case.

"When that last information came out, we were still kind of figuring out what role Steve [Gaynor] was going to play in Open Roads as he still is the company's owner, so it's kind of an unusual situation," says art director Noël Clark. "But as of June of 2021, he hasn't really had any involvement in Open Roads. We've taken it and made it our own."

The next step was deciding which team members wanted to stay at Fullbright. Fifteen employees had already left the project since development started in 2019. So many people came in and out that the developer questioned if there could be a unified vision. The remaining employees started simple, asking who wanted to keep making Open Roads. Then the team had to decide if finishing the game was feasible. Six members thought so. "It felt like there was still something about the game that we found very compelling," says engineering lead Aaron Freedman.

Executive producer Amy Fincher was the only one who wasn't with the team before Gaynor left. In fact, she accepted the job as the information was coming to light. "It was Noël [Clark] and another person on the team that came to me and were like, 'Hey, full transparency, here's what's going on: All these changes are happening, and we still want you on the team but now that it's a little different than what we had talked about before, do you still want to do it?'" Fincher recalls.

She had never worked with a team in flux like this but felt she had something to offer. "I felt like there were things I could do to help this team to restructure and figure out a plan to finish this game with a very different team composition," she says. "Also, just helping out a team that had been through a lot and had a lot of unique needs. It's very challenging for us, but as a producer, it's the kind of thing that I really like to do – try to make a difference in how a team operates day to day."

Taking Action

It's one thing to say you're making changes; it's another to make them. Fincher says her first big task was listening to everybody about what happened and how they wanted things to go in the future. More collaboration and creative freedom were high on the list, but another was full transparency.

"Everybody knows everything," Fincher says. "Everybody participates in all major decisions, and the budget is somewhere where anybody can look at it at any time, which was a big change in a lot of ways. It was a relief for me because in the past, as a producer, I'm kind of encouraged to really focus on giving the right information at the right time. And now it's more like, if I know something, everybody knows it. It's an easier way to work in many ways, and I enjoy it."

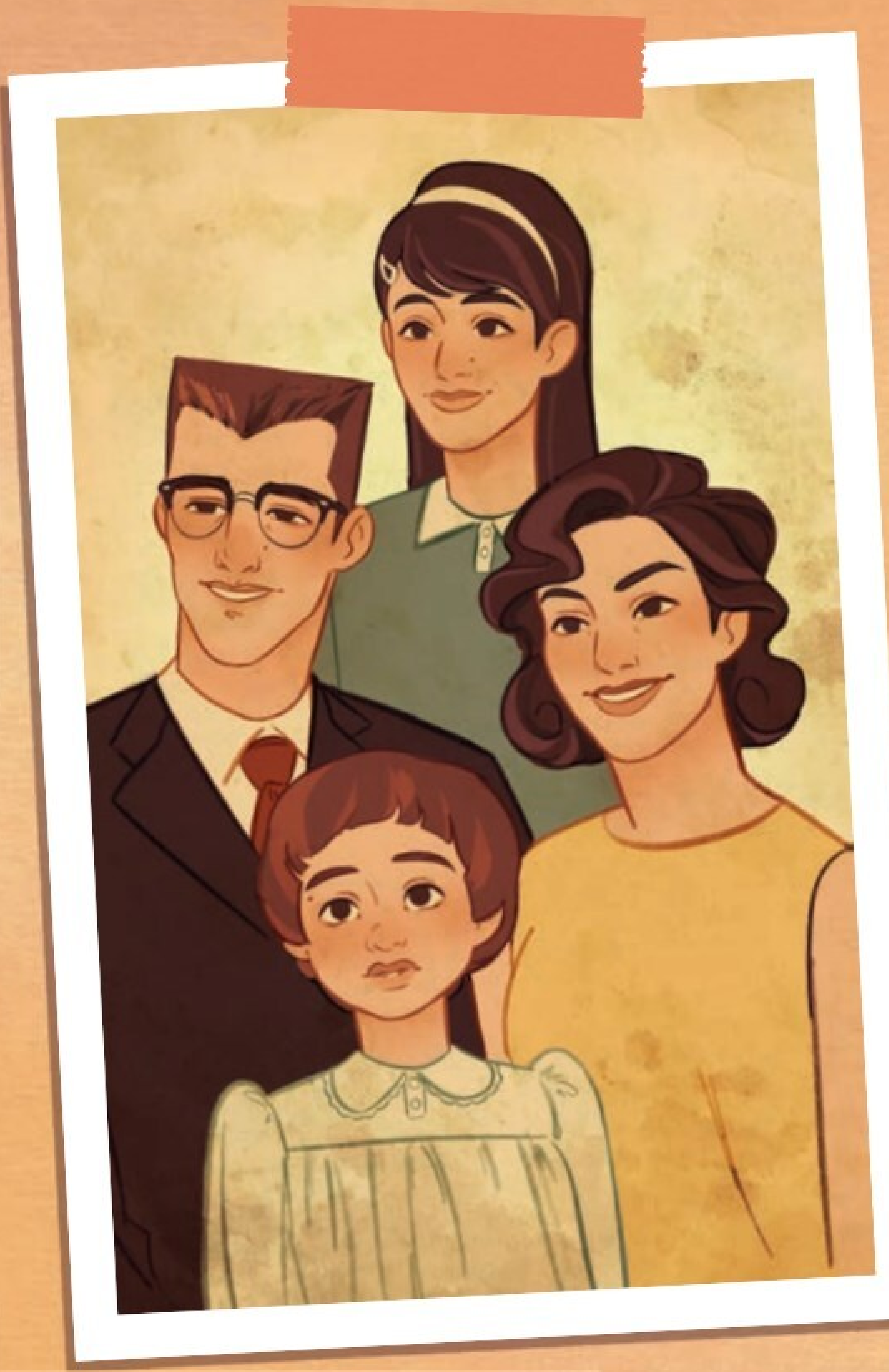
A STAR-STUDDED DUO: TESS AND OPAL'S RELATIONSHIP

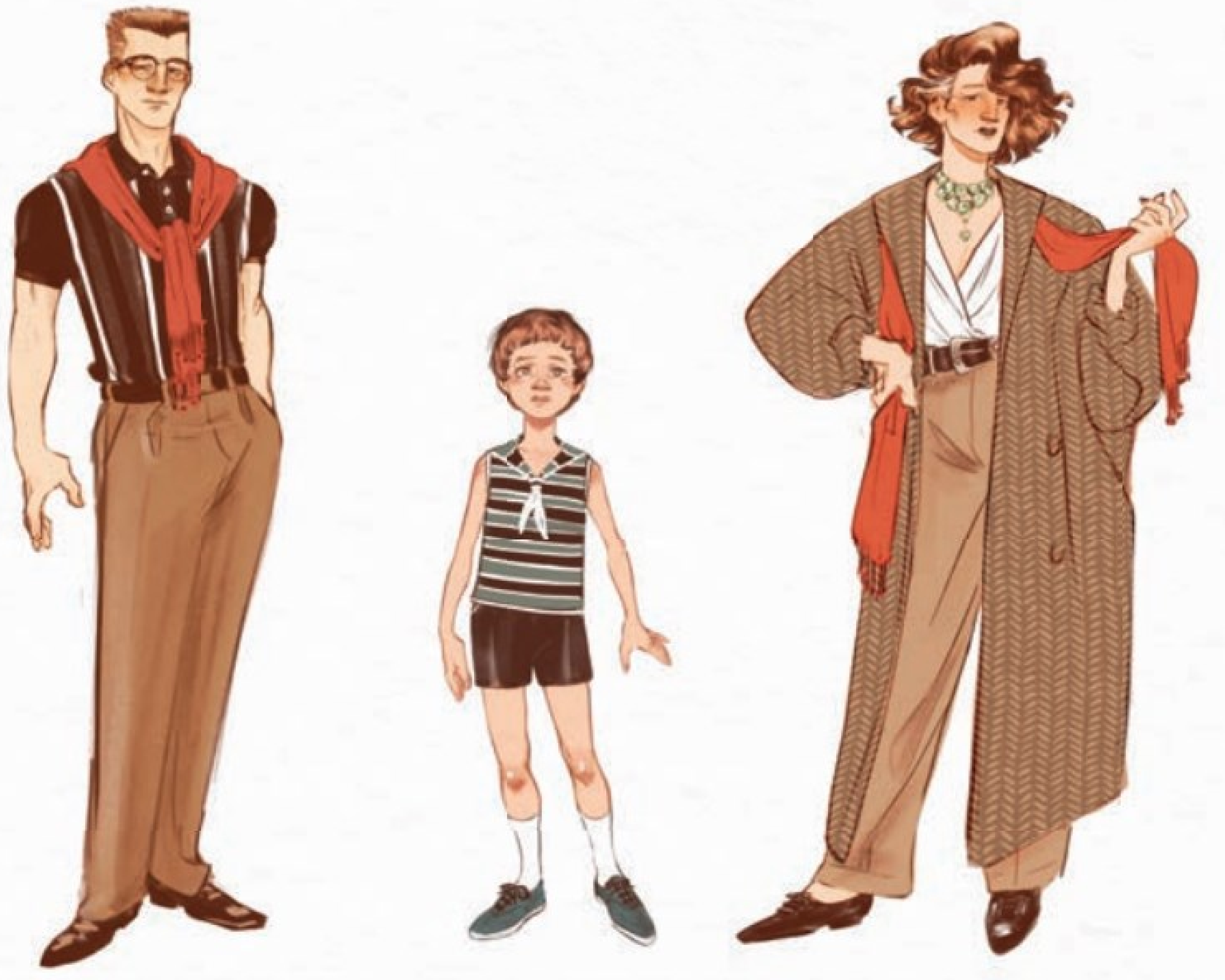
Actresses Keri Russell and Kaitlyn Dever have helped bring the characters of Opal and Tess to life, recording at times together and apart. This mother/daughter relationship is the most important aspect of Open Roads, and it's something about which Fullbright thought carefully.

"There aren't as many mother/daughter stories out as there are father/daughter and father/son stories," says executive producer Amy Fincher. "A pitfall we see sometimes is because there are so few mother/daughter stories, they kind of end up being the same story [with] the same conflicts and the same personality types."

At the start of the game, Opal and Tess are in a good place. There's a child and parent dynamic, but they've built a good relationship. "One thing that we talked a lot about in the beginning is with a lot of mother/daughter relationship stories that we see, like *Lady Bird*, for example, the plot is about that first step towards friends," explains graphic artist Harrison Gerard. "[*Lady Bird's*] ending is like, 'Okay, they're on their way.' And I think Open Roads is really interesting because they've kind of already had that happen. They don't start as enemies."

A lot of the journey centers on Tess seeing her mom as a person outside of that caretaker role. On the other side, Opal is noticing things about Tess that remind her of herself. "Tess is into movies and has a lot of personal interests that she pursues independently without anybody driving her to do that," Fincher says. "And Opal is kind of the same way. But she has a different perspective on those things because she's trying to do some creative things in her life, and not all of it worked out the way she wanted it to."





The shift in atmosphere helped form a new path for Open Roads. "The really impactful thing that I immediately noticed was the kind of the discussions that we were having," Freedman says. "They were very open. We were very willing to share ideas with each other about the game and what we thought we would like to change. It was very refreshing – that first moment of, like, 'Oh, we're going to really just look at this game and decide how we want to move forward."

Graphic artist Harrison Gerard agrees. Previously, he had to send suggestions up and down the ranks for approval. But in this new phase of development, he noticed a considerable shift in his responsibilities. "It kind of switched overnight into me and Noël [Clark] being like, 'Oh, it would be cool if we had a phone memo sheet or a *Playboy* magazine or something like that.' And then we'd just make it and put it in the game. It's a lot more responsibility, but it was also super creatively freeing to go from having just a laundry list of things that someone else thought should be in the game to stuff that you were creating out of whole cloth."

With new energy, the team sat down to look at the game in front of them. It could be their story, a group effort – not one person steering the ship. It was time for all of them to take control together. "I think the really important thing for Open Roads is that it is not any one person's vision anymore," Fincher says. "It is a collaboration, from design to story dialogues. Even on the individual objects, we put names and words that are important to us in the game ... so that fingerprints are on it beyond just the kind of behind-the-scenes collaboration we've done."

Reenvisioning the Journey

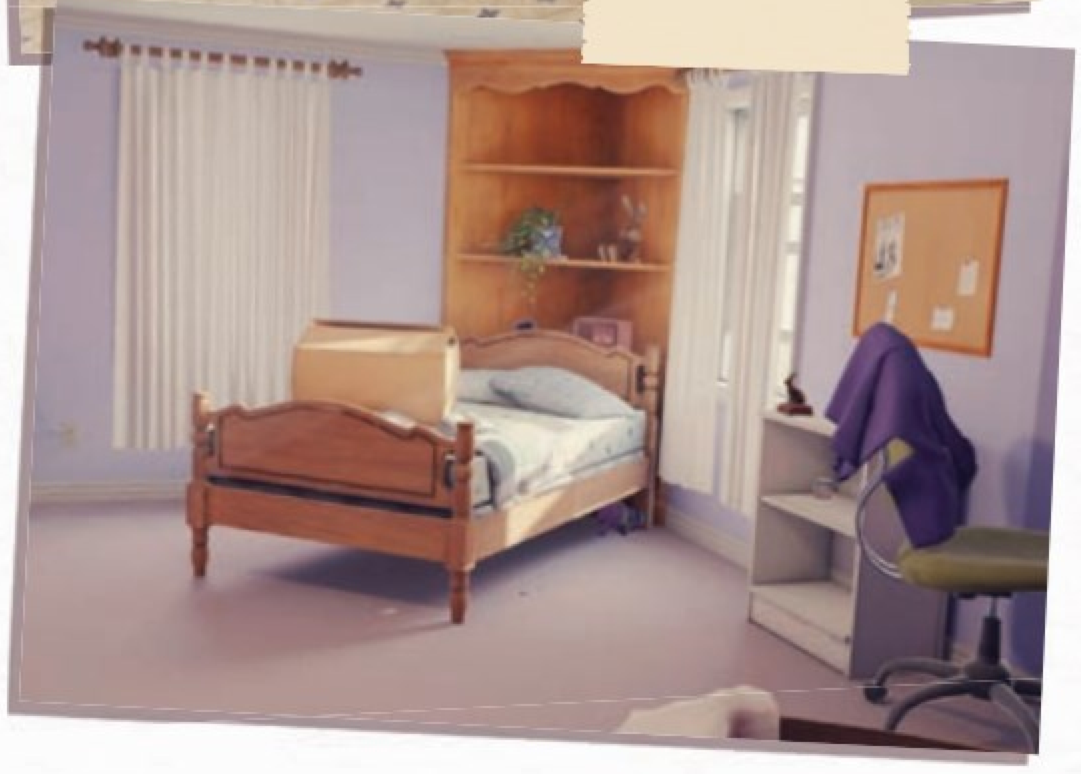
Open Roads' story was nearly three-quarters written and a quarter recorded by the voice actors when Fullbright restructured. "It was very interesting constraints to work in, but we also had a story [where] the basis really resonated with us," Gerard says.

Fullbright was adamant about keeping what most interested it: the core concept of a mother and daughter discovering more about themselves and their family history on a road trip. But the team decided to shift the narrative to be more relationship-centric [see Tess and Opal's Relationship sidebar]. "We took the story from something that was really plot-focused on this kind of *Goonies*-esque road trip zany thing," says Gerard, "to something that was much more character-focused and looked at the relationship between the mother and the daughter much more explicitly."

"A lot of the changes that we made had to do with editing things down, where it's like, 'Okay, here's this plot element or here's this element of the family mystery, and does this help us understand Tess and Opal?'" Fincher adds. "We made sure that all of the energy that we put into rewrites was all about these characters and making sure that as you play through the story, you see how their relationship evolves and changes."

The death of Opal's mother and Tess' grandmother is still what triggers their sudden road trip, and the mystery is still uncovering a big family secret. "As often happens when a family member passes away, you are looking at their stuff, and sometimes that starts conversations and inspires questions," Fincher says.

Tess, 16
Opal 16
August, 14
Opal 14
Tess, 13
Tess, 10
August, 9
August, 6
Tess, 6



The road trip takes place in 2003, driving through Michigan along the U.S. and Canadian border. You play as sixteen-year-old Tess and see the story play out through her eyes. "Tess is an exuberant young person who firmly believes that she knows what she wants, and she's kind of spunky," Gerard says. "With Opal, I think they're more similar than they would care to admit. I think Opal has kind of the same drive but in a little bit more of a mature way. They have a lot of humor in their relationship, which is something that we wanted to focus on and wrote even more additional dialogue [for]."

During the trip, you have dialogue choices, but they won't have big implications on the narrative, ending, or character personalities. "There is a really subtle way that we've approached the design of these choices," Freedman explains. "You're playing as Tess, and you get to make choices in dialogue as Tess, but you don't get to decide who Tess is fundamentally. You don't get to decide how she relates to Opal as a human being. But what you do get to do is roleplay as her, and you get to sort of affect the way that she navigates through these discussions and the world."

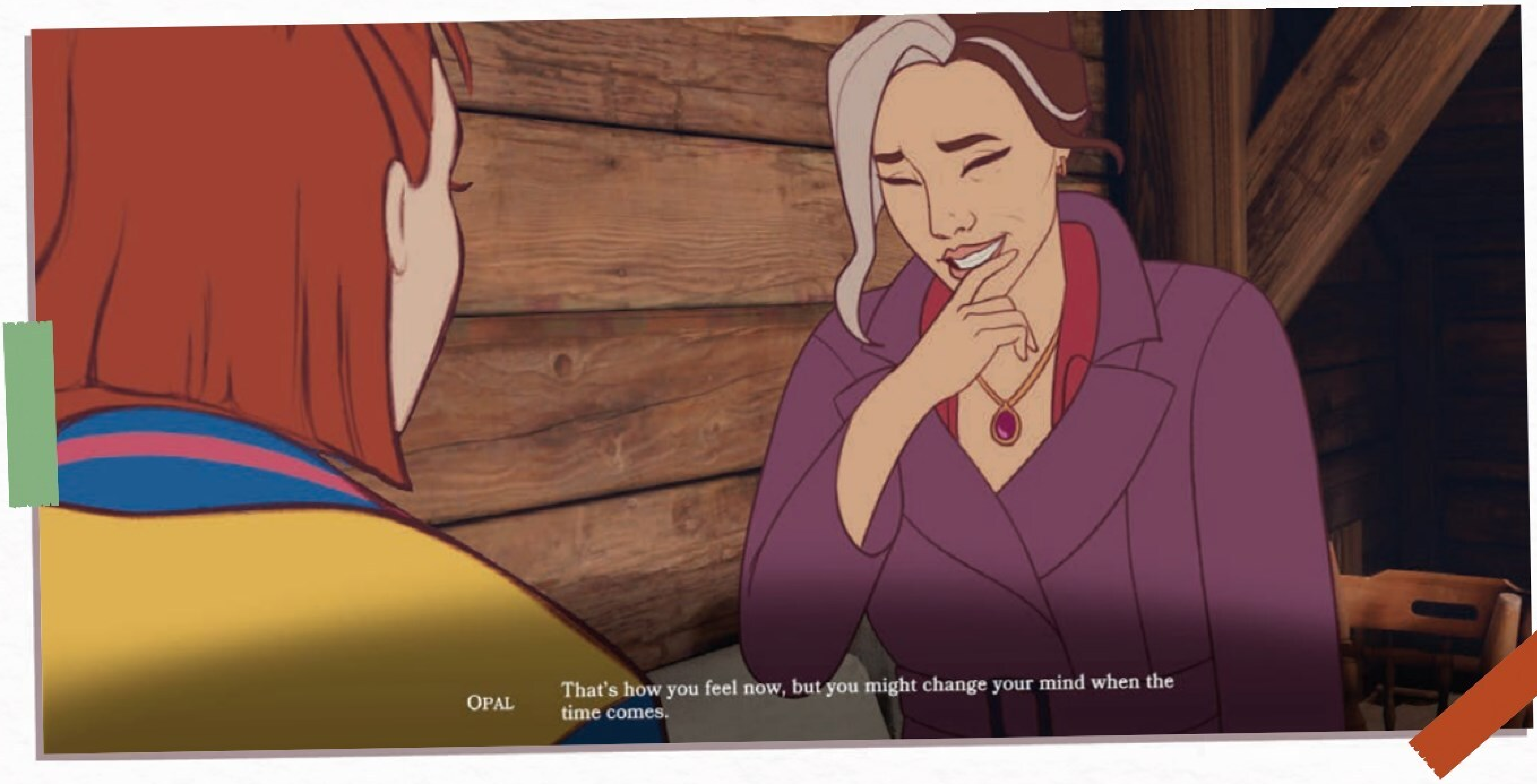
As this is a Fullbright game, it still has the structure we've come to know: exploring objects and environments to obtain more information and clues about the people and story. The team compares exploration to how you approach the dialogue choices. "There's a lot of objects you can choose to interact with or not, and which ones you look at will fill out your picture of what's going on in the story and what's going on with these characters," Fincher says. "That's also what happens in the dialogue; you choose what aspect of these characters [you] want to explore in the moment."

You also won't spend the entire time in a car trying to hold a conversation while passing cornfields and cows. "It's not about belaboring it and trying to simulate the experience of a road trip but to capture that feeling of it," Freedman says.

One way Fullbright thought to keep things interesting was focusing on Opal and Tess and their different feelings throughout the drive. "We talked a lot about what is it like to be trapped in the car with your mom," Fincher says. "So the focus was less on how do we recreate going on a physical journey to another place and more on how you feel when you're stuck in the car with your mom. What kind of things do you talk about? What things might you do to annoy her?"

You also make plenty of stops. "If what you like in a Fulbright game is the ability to go around interesting environments, pick stuff up, and learn about the people who live there, you will like this game," Gerard says. "That's still a huge focus and something that we care a lot about."

Fulbright wants every place you visit to have some history or secret attached to it. You often explore abandoned properties,



OPAL That's how you feel now, but you might change your mind when the time comes.

MEET THE TEAM

Noël Clark
art director

Amy Fincher
executive producer

Sarah Robertson
operations manager

Aaron Freedman
engineering lead

Harrison Gerard
graphic artist

Scott Hammack
designer

which fit into the game's larger themes. "A lot of times, it's about understanding what used to be there, what it was or what it could be, or what it didn't become," Freedman says. While Fullbright didn't want to describe specific places to avoid spoilers, the team did share more about their essence. "It almost has that gothic quality of areas that have some sense of either absence or decay," Fincher explains. "I wouldn't quite say like liminal, but there is that kind of mood throughout."

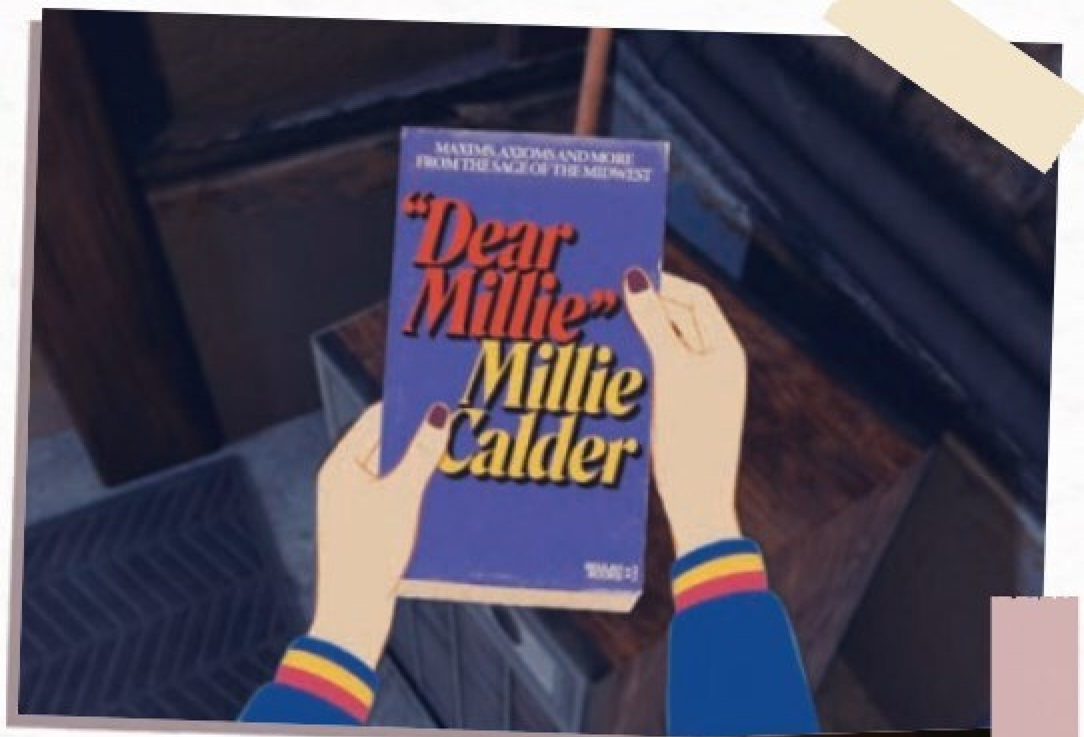
For example, one of the destinations you explore has a '60s aesthetic. You aren't going back in time, but you're seeing this place that hasn't been updated or touched for a while. "It was really fun from a design perspective to think, 'What are the trappings of this era, and how can we make stuff that is very recognizable as being from there without feeling overly kitschy?" Gerard says.

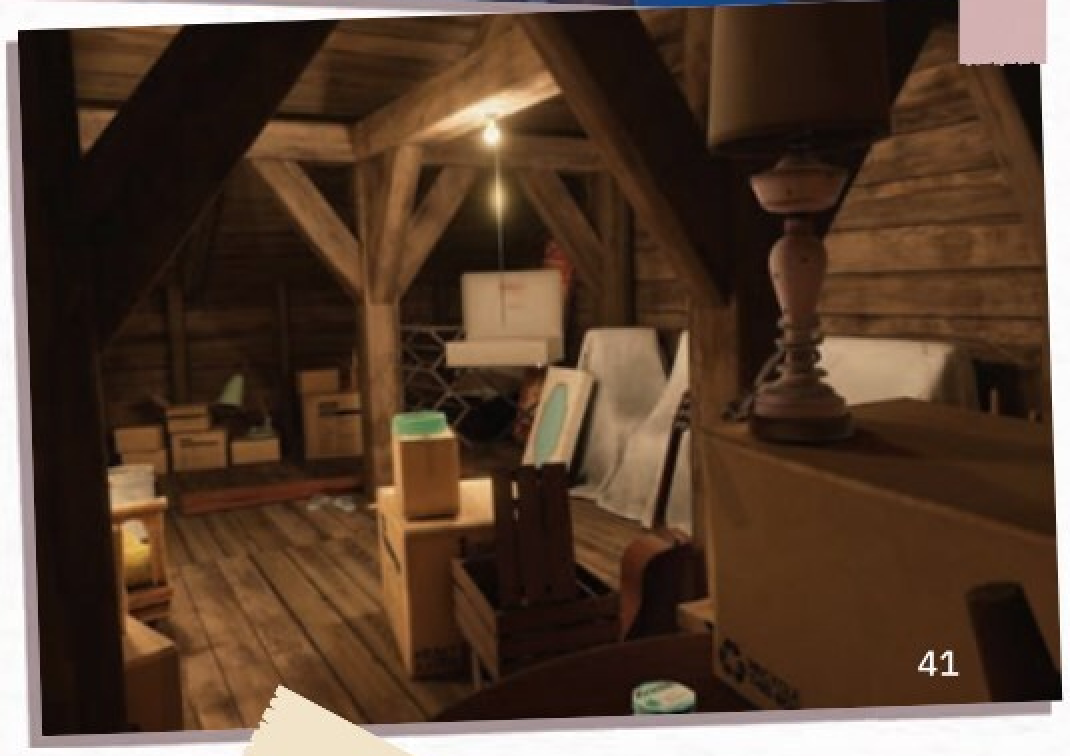
The team also added a few new layers to exploration. You can be as nosy as you want, but if you find something interesting, another character might weigh in on it. "[They'll] give you more information or be really cagey about it, making you even more curious about what the deal is with this thing because they won't tell you," Fincher says.

Turning the Key

Fullbright is edging toward its destination, preparing Open Roads for release. The team says they're currently wrapping things up and putting final touches on the game. They hope to set a specific date in the coming months. After surviving the trip's rough course, the team is proud of what they have been able to achieve. They've managed to put their own mark on the game and enact change at the studio. Like many people experienced when they saw Open Roads' debut trailer, the remaining members at Fullbright saw something and didn't want to leave it behind. The excitement is palpable as the team discusses Open Roads and their excitement for people to play it, but it's also clear they've come out of the process with a lot more knowledge and a better path forward.

"The short version for me is that hard things are worth doing," Fincher says. "It's harder to have transparent processes in a lot of ways than it is to have them limited. It's harder to always keep every single person on the team in the loop on all things. And luckily, our team was small enough that that was possible. If you have [a] 100-person team, I don't know if that's possible. But I think that one of the big takeaways for me is that it's worth examining these kinds of things and seeing if sometimes that time investment, that extra time investment can really yield great results." ■

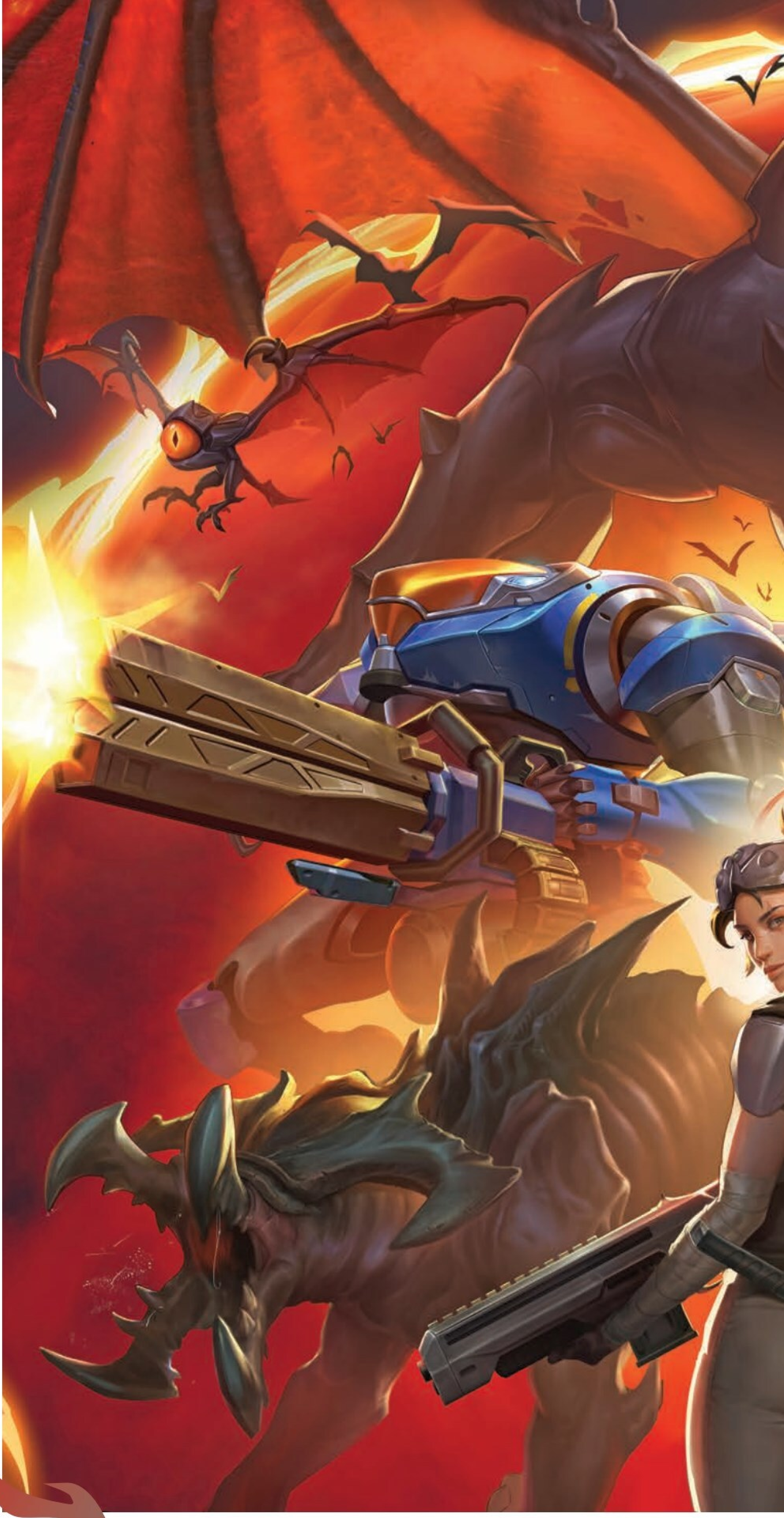


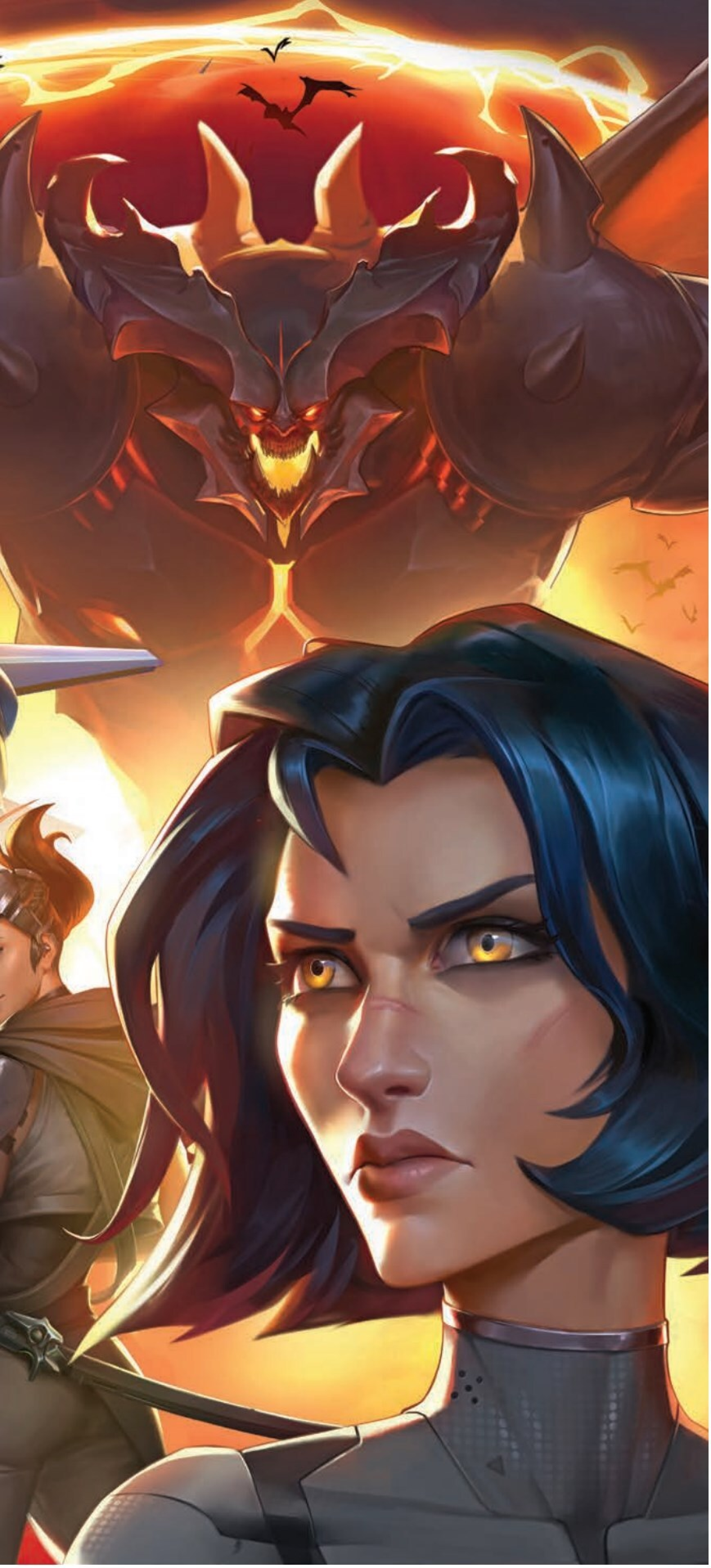


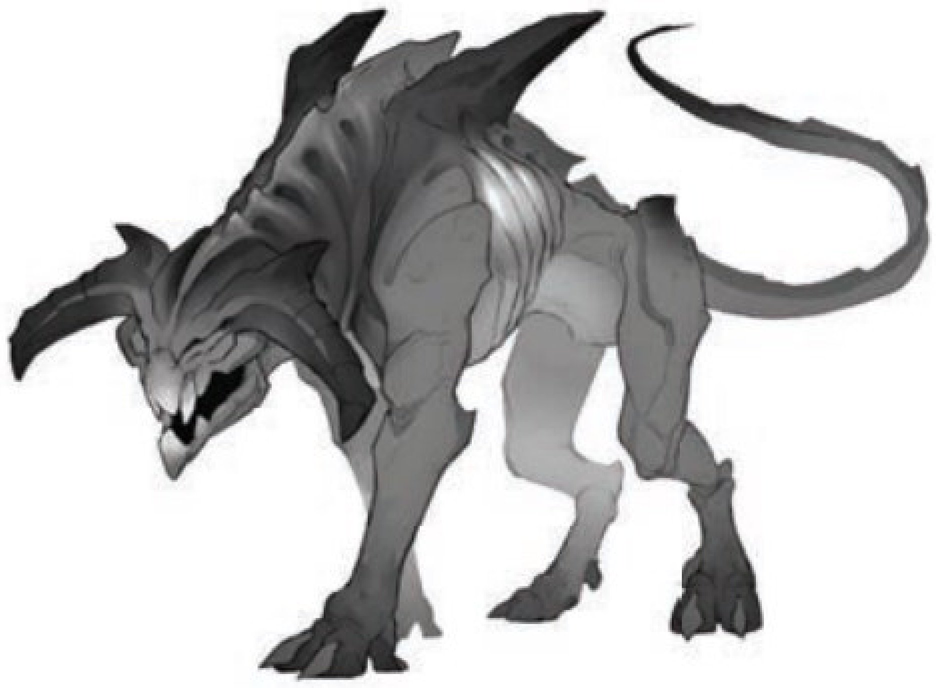
BACK FROM THE BRINK

An early look at Stormgate, Frost Giant Studios' daring attempt at reinvigorating real-time strategy

by Matt Miller





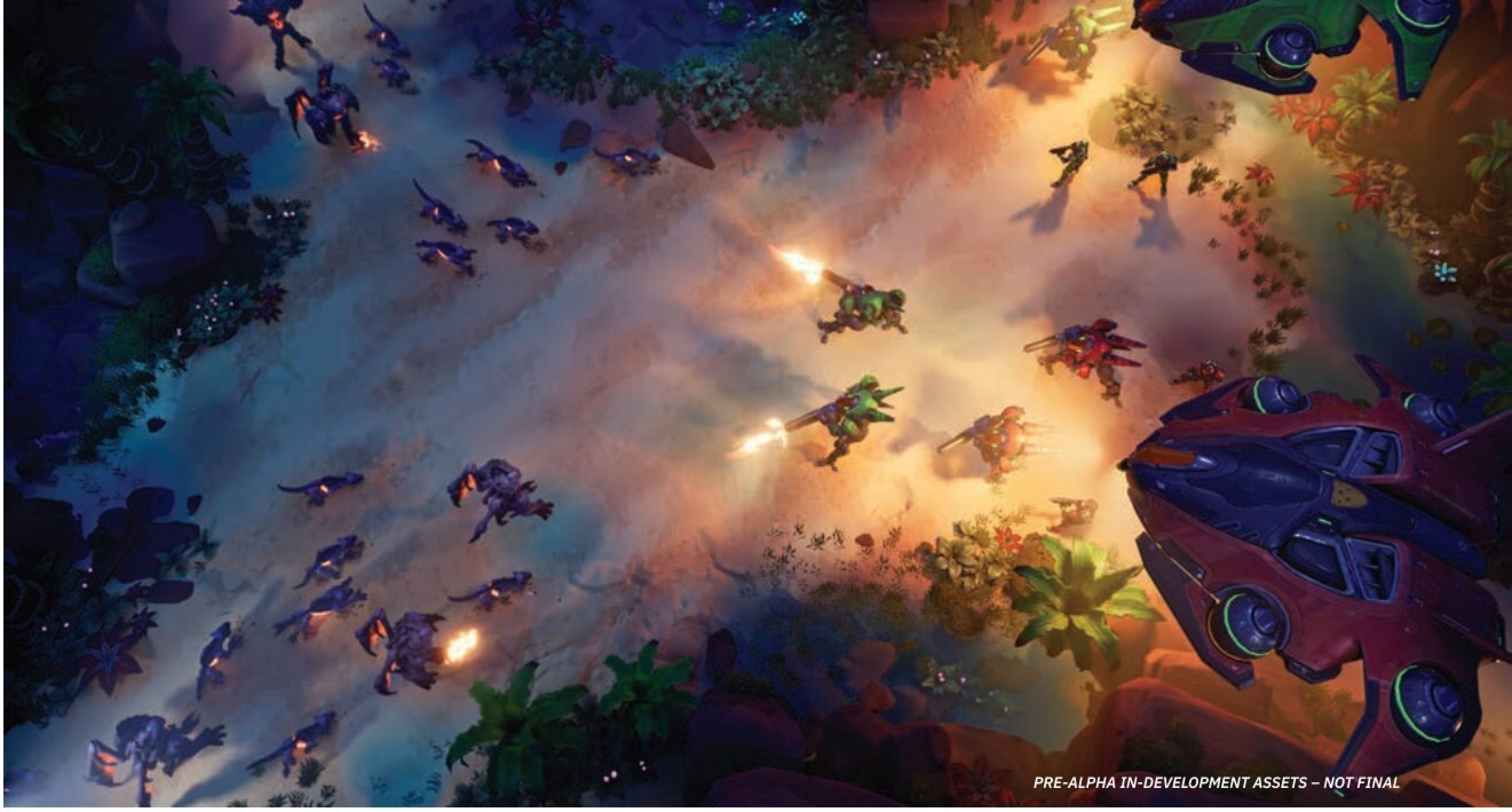


IN EARTH'S DISTANT FUTURE, humanity has been devastated by an alien apocalypse, pushed to the verge of destruction. Years after the invaders swept in through mysterious gateways sheathed in lightning, the civilization and technology that once spread across the world are gone, leaving it reshaped virtually beyond recognition. But the tenacity of the spirit has kept hope alive, and in the decades following the sudden crash, human resistance is on the rise. New technologies open the door to fighting back. The people of Earth are ready to retake their home.

Veterans of the strategy development community have gathered at Frost Giant Studios, most notably a swath of former Blizzard developers who were instrumental in creating games like Warcraft III and Starcraft II. Over a decade has passed since that latter project, during which real-time strategy has had its fortunes shift. RTS was once one of the centerpieces of PC gaming, but the rise of MOBAs and other genres took a bite of the pie. The audience and their expectations have also shifted. Even strong titles from franchises like Age of Empires and Company of Heroes don't seem to reach the critical mass they once did.

In the wake of that shift, the developers at Frost Giant have a new vision for RTS, rooted in the lessons learned from previous work, but embracing the future of living, growing games. Like humanity's tenacious rise from the ashes, Frost Giant uses new technology to leverage a comeback. The developer hopes to craft not just the next great RTS but the one that gets everyone playing again.

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy (6-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Frost Giant Studios **DEVELOPER** Frost Giant Studios **RELEASE** TBA



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MATCH MAKING

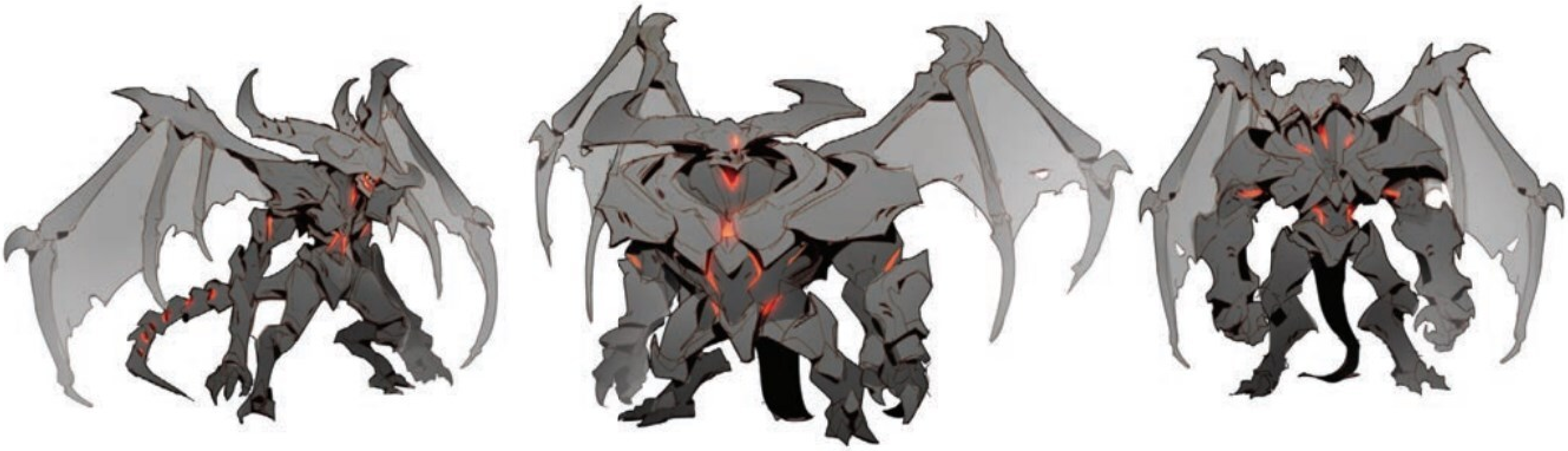
"There's definitely a core audience that is near and dear to our heart that has stuck with RTS through thick and thin over the years, who are its most passionate supporters," says game director Tim Campbell. "And then there's this larger audience out there that has come in and tried RTS, or maybe they've been intimidated by it or bounced off of it because of the stress level and competitive play or whatever else. And we think that there's a way to get the genre that we know and that we love, and really be able to bring everybody into it."

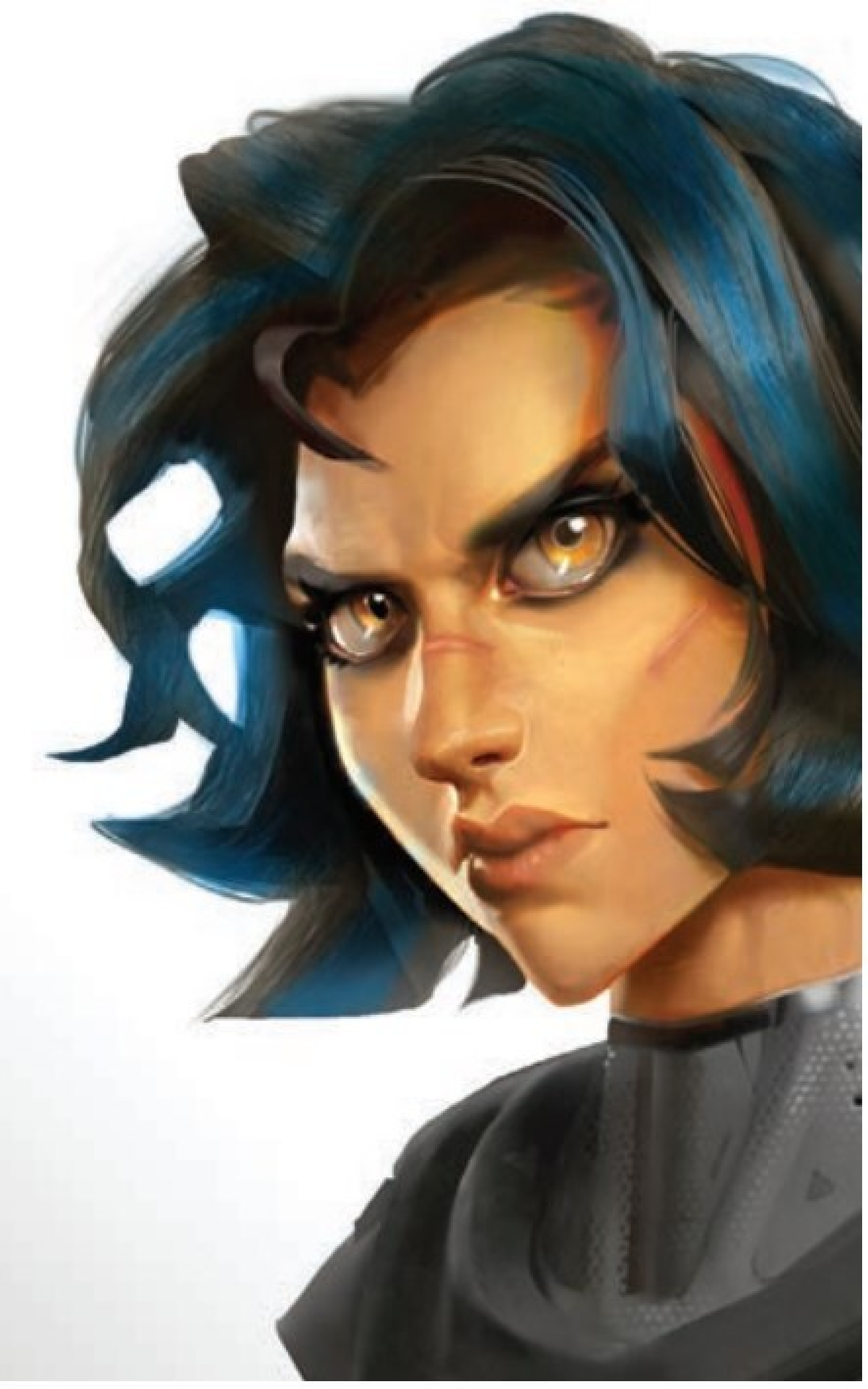
Campbell is no newcomer to parsing the changing tastes of the RTS gamer. Having worked on projects like Warcraft III and Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2, he has a long history with the genre – a professional heritage shared by many on his team. "We actually have members of the team who have worked on a lot of different RTS franchises," Campbell says. "And I think we've taken bits and pieces of what we've learned over the years working in the genre along with us into the game that we're building here."

With the opportunity to listen in and observe Campbell and the Frost Giant team during development meetings, it's clear the nods to past RTS success stories are more than lip service. From objective placement on a multiplayer map to the relative value of harvesting units, I'm repeatedly impressed with the team's methodical approach to each tiny facet of the real-time strategy experience and how and where Stormgate will fit into that legacy.

But even with that careful attention to past efforts, it would be a mistake to understand Stormgate as an attempt at replicating the past. "For us, being able to build a new universe alongside this game, it really came with a wide-open design space," Campbell says. "We're not inheriting a franchise that says you have to right-click or left-click for the interface, for example, or that you have to have a top bar or a sidebar. It actually was wide open. And so that was a new design challenge for me: How do you approach something from a complete blank slate?"

That flexibility has led to an analytical approach to design. The whole development team shapes the finished product around tried-and-true tactics and works backward to achieve the desired result. "For instance, one of those considerations is worker death – that's one aspect of game pacing," Campbell says. "Do we want players to feel frenetic and rushed and stressed when they're playing this game? Or do we want them to feel slow and relaxed? Or some balance in between? And ultimately, yes, we want to find some balance. But we work our way there by being analytic[al] and really trying to find examples and references and define what the player experiences is intended to be."





SETTING UP BASE

Stormgate is a long way from launch. It's earlier than we're often privy to a game in development, especially in recent years, when many developer teams cringe at the possibility of the press exposing early unrefined imagery or discussing concepts that aren't yet finalized. The team's openness to an early look is refreshing and speaks to confidence born from experience.

It's that exact reason that my time checking out the game is so fascinating. As I sit in on a two-hour prototype playtest, the team members leverage not just combined decades of development skill but an even longer span as fans. "We have a lot of experience on the team," Campbell says. "But I think that is dwarfed by the number of hours that our team has just played as fans of the genre either before we got into this industry or as mod makers before we became professionals."

Throughout the multiplayer playtest, the team attempts a new approach to objectives in a three-versus-three gameplay mode. It's a critical style of play to nail correctly, as the developers are united in the idea that social play is key to drawing in new players. In a prior approach, competing teams had to hold a secondary control point to create vulnerability in a central structure closer to the enemy base and then take out the weakened structure to win. But in the days before the playtest, the secondary control point went through a makeover, now represented as an A.I.-controlled monster that must be destroyed to create the vulnerability. Did it make the action flow more smoothly? Did the addition of that combat against an A.I. opponent add tension and excitement? Multiple full playthroughs in the prototype lead to positive initial feedback. But much work remains to be done.

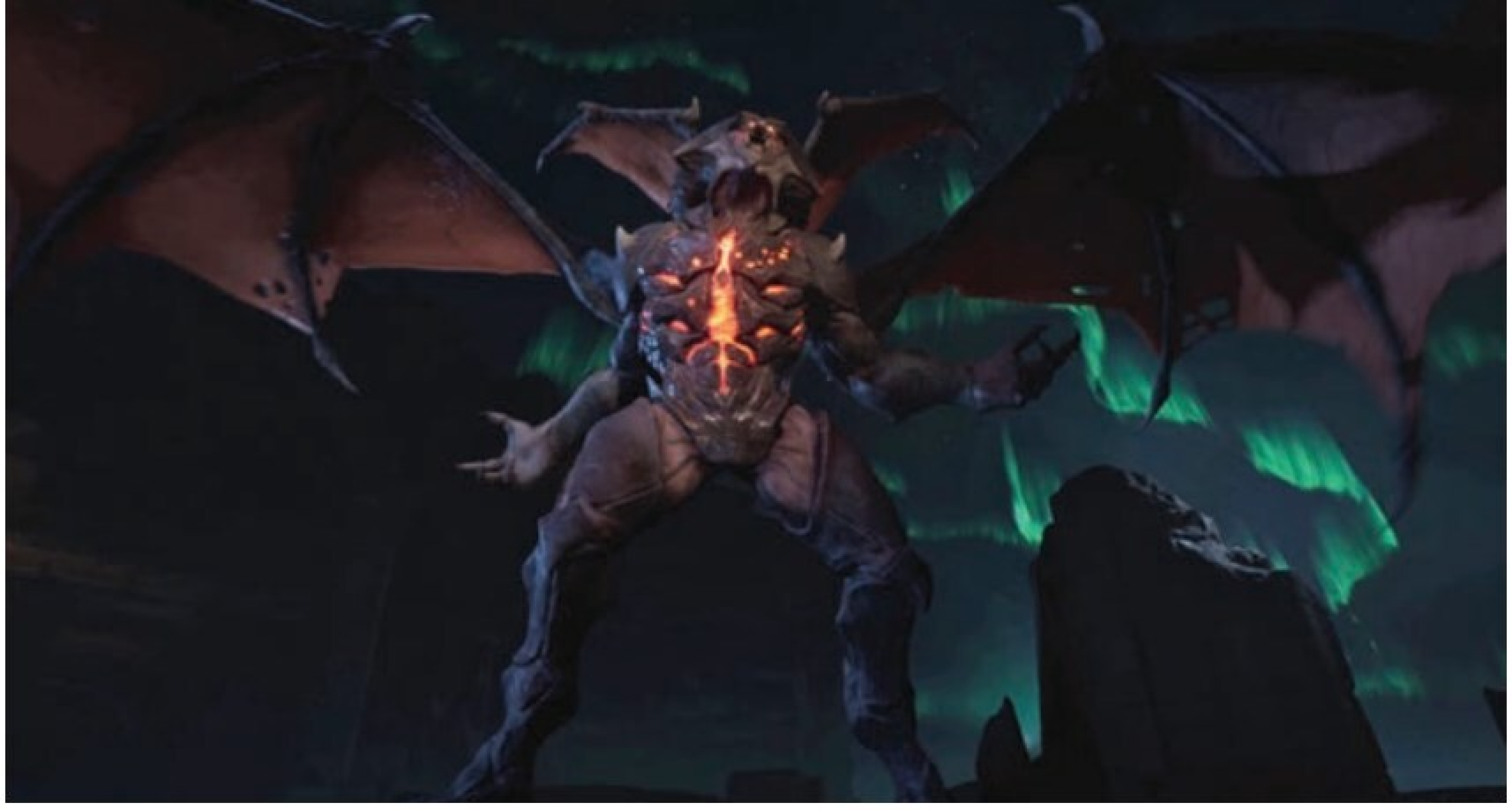
The final version of Stormgate aims to be an early standard-bearer for Unreal Engine 5. The game joins a growing cadre of titles leveraging the powerful tech for a new generation of games. "Unreal 5 is incredible," Campbell says. "We are huge fans of it. We've been able to prototype quickly, we've been able to explore all sorts of extra effects, and we've been able to prototype in a way that is faster than I think we were expecting to be able to." The team is gradually moving into using the new engine, doing significant prototyping outside of the engine, and then transferring progressively over as art and other elements come online. And while UE5 offers a lot of solutions, the veteran team is looking for ways to adapt the engine to optimize for its specific needs. "For instance, we have a deterministic simulation that we're using in order to drive the unit count that we're looking for, just to have a large number of characters moving intelligently around and pathfinding and interacting with the world in a deterministic way," Campbell continues.

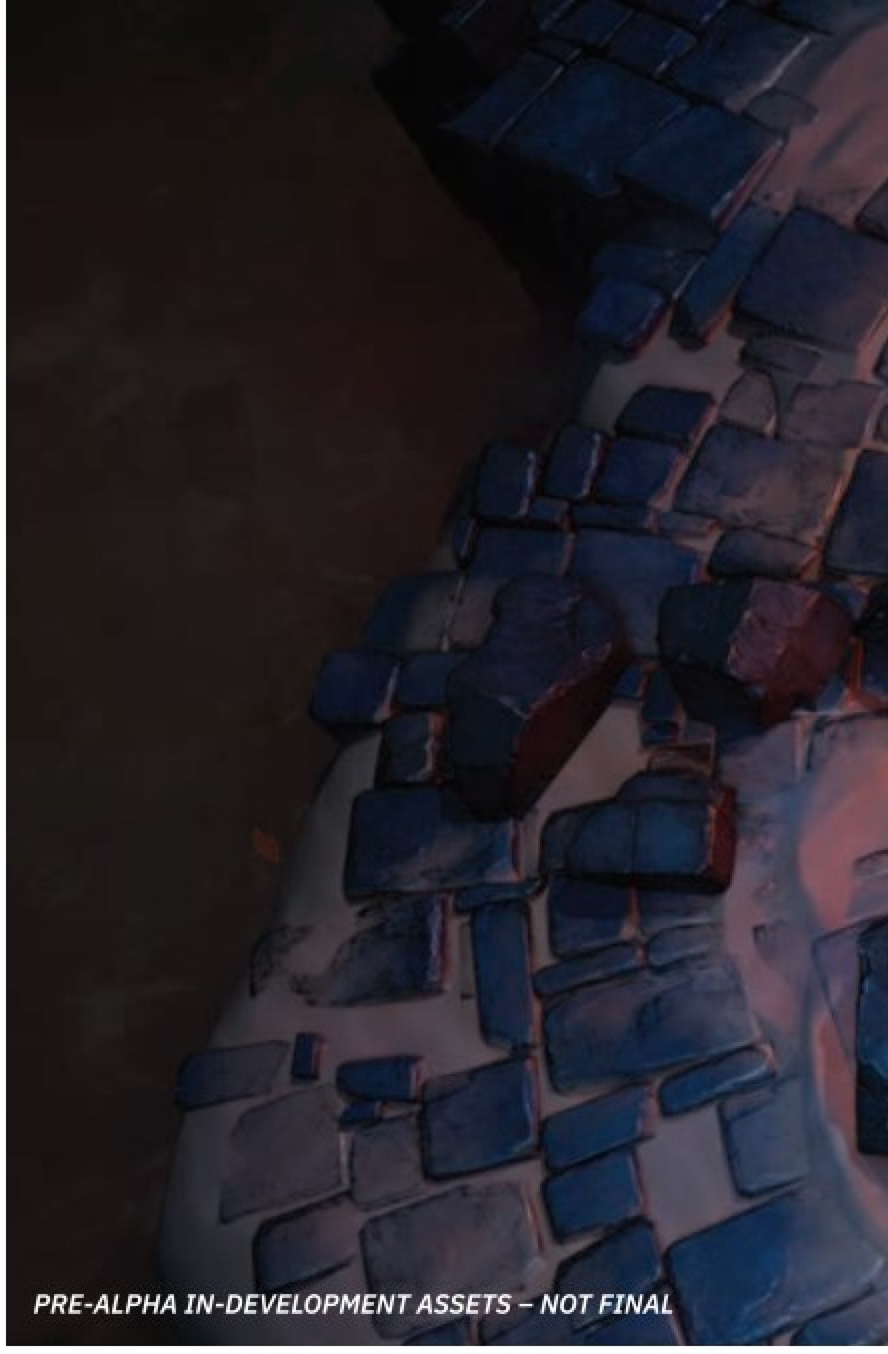
Frost Giant views Stormgate as the start of something big for the studio, not a one-and-done release. Stormgate is planned as an ongoing free-to-play live-service game, but on a scope that feels novel for RTS fans. Frost Giant hopes to maintain player interest and engagement over time. The studio plans major new story content and campaigns, new factions, and game modes, all rolling out gradually over the project's life. "We're looking at a regular cadence of story releases," Campbell says. "And then have those be things that can coincide with new characters, new tile sets, new features being rolled out. Those story content releases wind up being kind of a drumbeat that we arrange other releases around."

CLEARING THE FOG OF WAR

While many specific story beats are kept tightly under wraps, Stormgate's fiction and world-building are well underway. That starts with the game's name and its integral connection to the conflicts at hand. "It comes directly from our fiction," Campbell says. "We have a universe that in a lot of ways is defined by forces moving through these portals between different dimensions. Being able to move armies through these, being able to conquer worlds, and being able to interact with places. And these gates are called stormgates because they require a lot of power to open, and traditionally open during massive electrical storms that occur periodically."

Humans are the first and most familiar playable faction, and the Infernals are the second army players control. "The Infernal host is this star-spanning horror, this alien horde of human-like marauders," Campbell says. "They have fought and waged wars of conquest





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all across the galaxy, and they actually came to Earth thousands of years ago and affected how human civilization progressed. And with our apocalypse, they are returning to Earth once again."

The initial campaign story structure shows the devastating effects of this cataclysmic apocalypse and depicts it through the eyes of young characters, who we then jump ahead to meet again many years later. By then, humans have developed technological marvels for fighting back against the Infernals, including walking mechs that stand toe-to-toe with the most dangerous alien foes.

It begs the question; if the Infernals wiped out most of civilization, how could the bedraggled survivors possibly hope to fight back? "The development team raised that same question," Campbell admits. "One of the things that rings true to us is that one of humanity's strengths is adaptability and versatility – the ability to acclimatize to changing conditions, and the ability to band together to overcome incredible obstacles." To nail that vibe, Stormgate's human faction feels unquestionably scrappy; they fight as underdogs. But by reverse engineering enemy technology and genetics and ancient artifacts from the Infernals' original time on Earth, humans have just enough to try and mount a resistance.

To personify those conflicts, expect some central characters calling to mind the work many of the team's members did at Blizzard, such as Starcraft's Jim Raynor and Sarah Kerrigan or Warcraft's Thrall or Arthas – foundational characters and familiar cultural touchstones in the gaming landscape. Frost Giant hopes to craft similarly impactful figures for Stormgate. One of the most central roles is an as-yet-unnamed girl we meet in the terrifying early days of the apocalypse, only to reconnect as an adult fighting amidst the resistance. For the development team, it's the connection to these relatable individuals that elevates a good RTS campaign into greatness. "We're able to see her in gameplay on both sides," Campbell says. "I think it's something which will bring the apocalypse into the personal level. It's not just Earth and humanity and civilization, but there are actual tangible impacts on these people in their personal lives. And you get to see that play out."

An early cinematic introduces another core aspect of the story. A human archaeologist uncovers an ancient shield acting as a keystone to tracking hidden artifacts across the Earth, left behind since the Infernals were on the planet millennia earlier. A significant focus of the initial human-focused campaign is the quest to find those scattered artifacts and use them to fuel a strike back.

STORMGATE

LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE

While it might not be the first thing you think about, it's a fair bet that you recognize the contours and colors that make up your favorite game's logo. As one of the foundational visuals for a franchise, the logo is a visual touchstone that must also call to mind the game's inherent nature. The team at Hamagami/Carroll created the logos for World of Warcraft, Diablo 1 and 2, and Starcraft 1 and 2, among many others. So, when a team of former Blizzard RTS developers at Frost Giant wanted a new logo for Stormgate, they knew with whom to partner.

"It's kind of looking for that lightning in a bottle – a perfect mix of utility and inspiration," says Hamagami/Carroll chief creative officer Justin Carroll. "It's for a videogame, so it has to be badass and unique, it has to capture the essence of the game, and in the best of worlds needs to deliver a 'holy s---, that's awesome' moment."

The designers gradually iterate from multiple options, drawing on different narrative aspects. The final version of the Stormgate logo evokes the gates themselves, with a mix of futuristic metallic elements and hints of mystic runes and ruins. "It's a very collaborative process," Carroll says. "We share our designs with the Frost Giant team and jointly assess the pros and cons of each – we get to the finish line together. We've agreed that the final version captures just the right amount of game-specific personality and that it's unique enough within the genre to stand out."

A CLEAR STRATEGY

When speaking to the Frost Giant developers, there's a continual focus on the mixed audiences they're trying to engage. After years of work in the field, they're hoping to nail the high-end competitive experience so integral to games like Warcraft III and Starcraft II. To do so, Frost Giant is crafting a tightly balanced tactical experience supporting a range of strategies and playstyles across a compelling mix of factions that will eventually grow in scope beyond the initial offering of Humans and Infernals.

But the more surprising fact is Frost Giant's expressed interest in all the other players – the silent majority of former and current RTS fans who deeply enjoy campaign storytelling, cooperative opportunities, and social play. "We believe that the RTS genre has its best days ahead of it," says Campbell. "That there are just new heights that we can achieve in terms of popularity, in terms of [the] number of people playing, and in terms of just the quality of experiences that we can we can deliver to players."

To balance those competing needs, Frost Giant focuses on approachability, from an especially nuanced and integrated new user experience – not simply a tutorial but rather an experience fully wrapping into all aspects of gameplay. Cooperative play is another focus, emphasizing ways for players to join up together, even when friends are at different skill levels.

But along the way, tight and uncompromising RTS play, rooted in the tradition established by the Blizzard RTS games many on the team once worked on, remains the foundation. "It is a stake in the ground that we are adamant about that approachability cannot be to the detriment of the core experience," Campbell insists. "We are putting a forcefield around protecting that core game experience."

Stormgate may have a long road ahead to completion, but my early glimpses show great promise. It's telling when a developer has done its homework, rooting its creative decisions in a desire for innovation against the backdrop of established work. In this case, Frost Giant Studios is leaning heavily on its expertise and applying new technology and gameplay ideas to take the next step up. Real-time strategy may not be the juggernaut it once was, but Frost Giant is taking all the proper first steps to bring it back in a big way. ■

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FOURTH AND LONG

COMING OFF THE SERIES' TWO LOWEST-REVIEWED GAMES, EA SPORTS CALLS AN AUDIBLE WITH MADDEN NFL 23

BY BRIAN SHEA

The developers behind the Madden games have read the messages. They've seen the complaints. They've heard players call them lazy, saying each successive game is just a roster update. But most importantly, they've taken the time to sift through the name-calling and the anger, drilling down into actionable items they can use to improve this year's entry. They know fans expect better than what the past two years delivered, and they want to prove the doubters wrong. Now, with the late John Madden back on the cover of his series, developer EA Tiburon is ready to deliver a product worthy of the legendary coach, commentator, and video game icon.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Sports (6-Player Online)
PUBLISHER EA Sports **DEVELOPER** EA Tiburon **RELEASE** August 19

HUDDLING UP

The new five-story downtown Orlando development studio for the Madden franchise is unassuming from the outside. Sure, there's a giant sign reading "Electronic Arts" on the building, but other than that, you would never guess that one of the United States' biggest games is created within those walls. However, once you make it through the lobby and into the halls, the history of EA Tiburon quickly becomes apparent.

Scattered throughout the bullpens where developers sit are artifacts from Tiburon's past. Display cases highlight replica championship trophies and action figures of past cover athletes like Ray Lewis and Russell Westbrook. At the bottom of the display case, beneath the autographed footballs and jerseys, lie reminders of how long Tiburon has been in the game. A collection of boxes dating back to the Sega Genesis pay tribute to series like NHL, NASCAR Thunder, NBA Street, NBA Live, Tiger Woods PGA Tour, and EA MMA. However, even among the non-sports Tiburon titles like Soviet Strike for Sega Saturn and Superman Returns for Xbox 360, the Madden NFL series stands out as the studio's favorite child.

Room after room, shelf after shelf, the new Orlando offices brim with love for the NFL and its long history with the Madden franchise. That same passion comes through when you talk to those working at Tiburon. The enthusiasm when I ask about the changes they're making to Franchise mode or how the new FieldSense gameplay impacts the action is evident. Bring up the man whose name is synonymous with video game football, and the developers light up. It's clear the studio had a fantastic relationship with John Madden. And when news hit that the legendary figure passed away in December 2021, there was only ever one option of what to do with this year's game: honor their favorite coach.

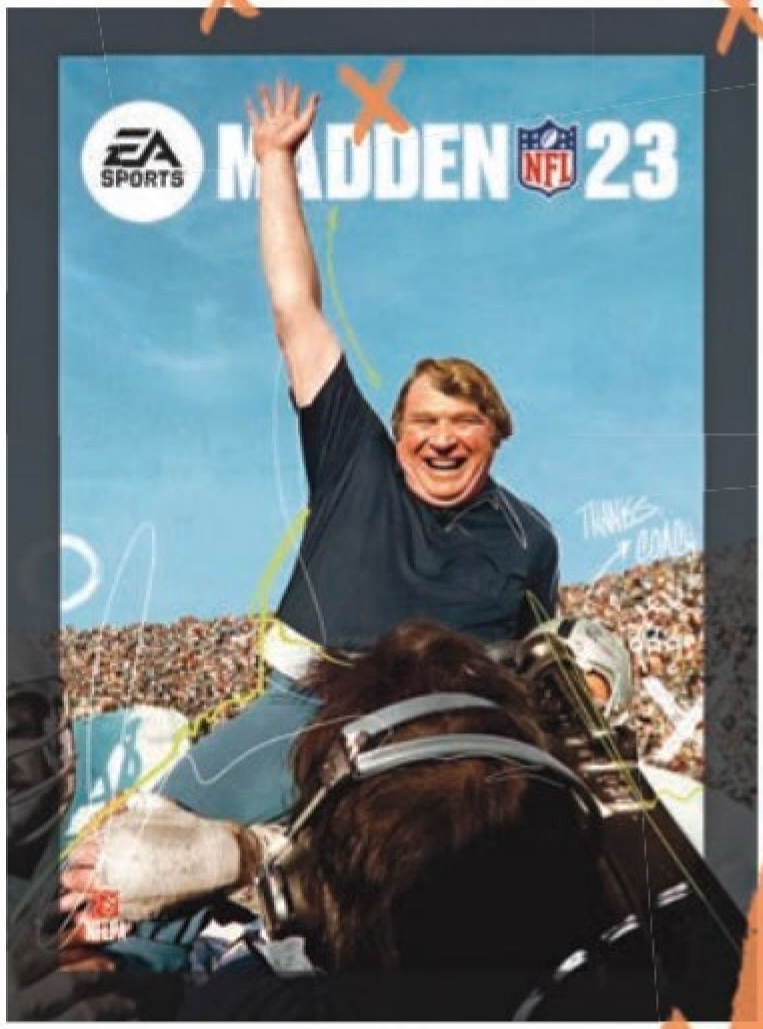
That's why this year, rather than continuing the tradition of the cover athlete, EA instead opted to create three unique covers featuring Madden – the first time he's appeared on the main box art in more than two decades. These covers honor three distinct areas of his contributions to the game of football: head coaching, color commentating, and video games. The covers pay loving tribute to the man who helped make the football franchise possible, and EA Sports wants to ensure the product inside the box reflects that same love and passion. To accomplish this, the team did some soul-searching.

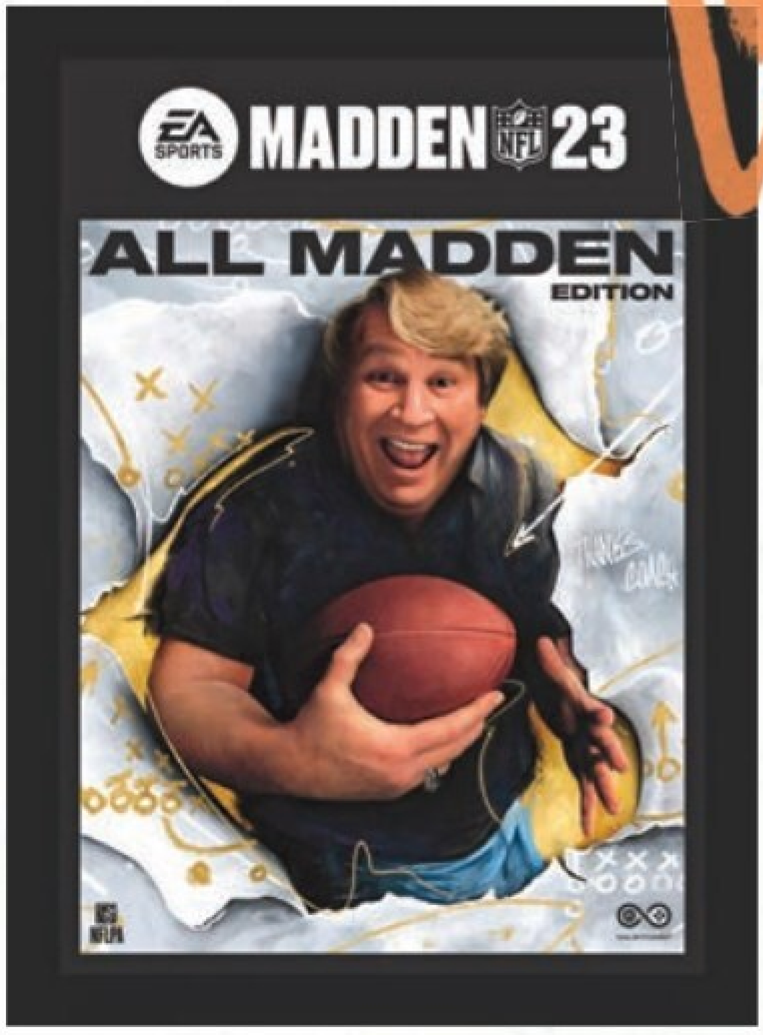
According to senior producer Mike Mahar, the developers looked at reviews, tweets, Reddit posts, and more to see what needed focus before jumping into development on Madden NFL 23. "One approach we took this year that is slightly different than what we did year over year is we took a pretty big pause after launching Madden 22," Mahar says. "We mined every source of feedback we could for common and consistent feedback and challenges or just flat-out issues consumers were having with the game. While I can't sit here and say unequivocally that we've fixed every single issue, I can say unequivocally we've addressed hundreds of issues in pre-production, and we added hundreds more during production that we addressed."

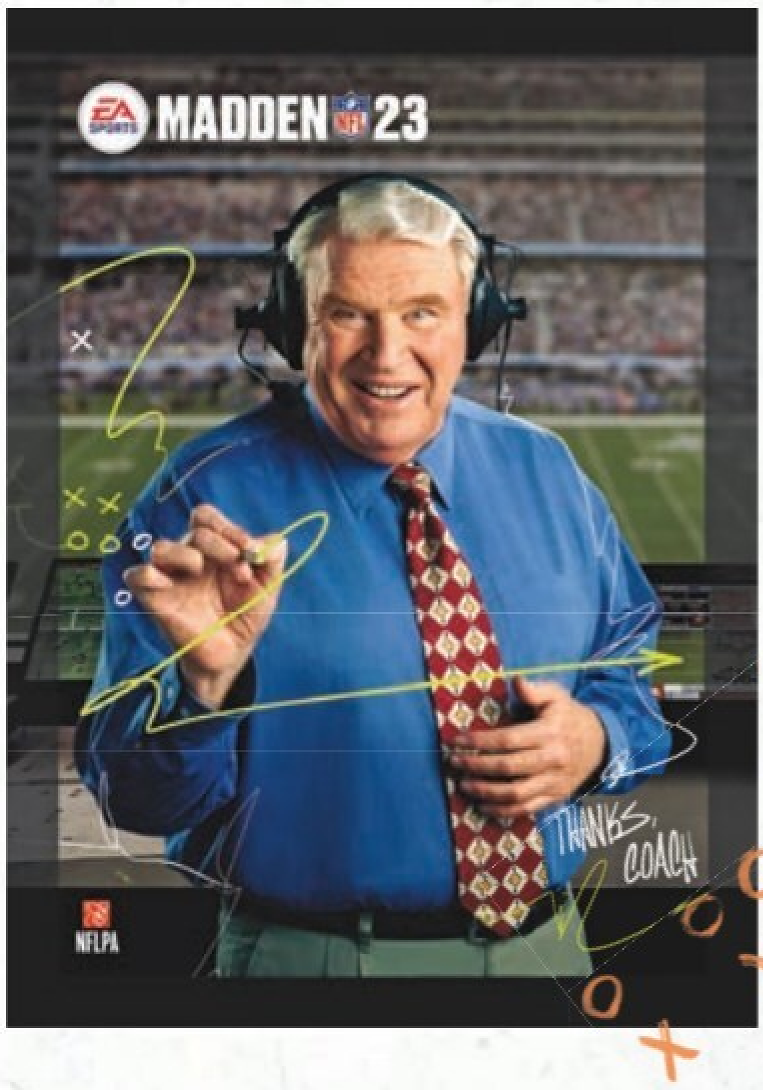
While those fixes aren't going to make any back-of-box feature lists, the change in approach is notable for the studio's acknowledgment that something wasn't working. New content and features could feel hollow if EA didn't first shore up problems from previous games. However, that doesn't mean the team isn't implementing multiple changes in hopes of making Madden NFL 23 transcend the criticism of the game feeling like "just a roster update."

A NEW SENSE OF GAMEPLAY

The most significant new feature in Madden NFL 23 is FieldSense, a PS5 and Xbox Series X/S-exclusive gameplay system giving players more control over their on-field team. The mechanic mainly addresses widespread criticism that the







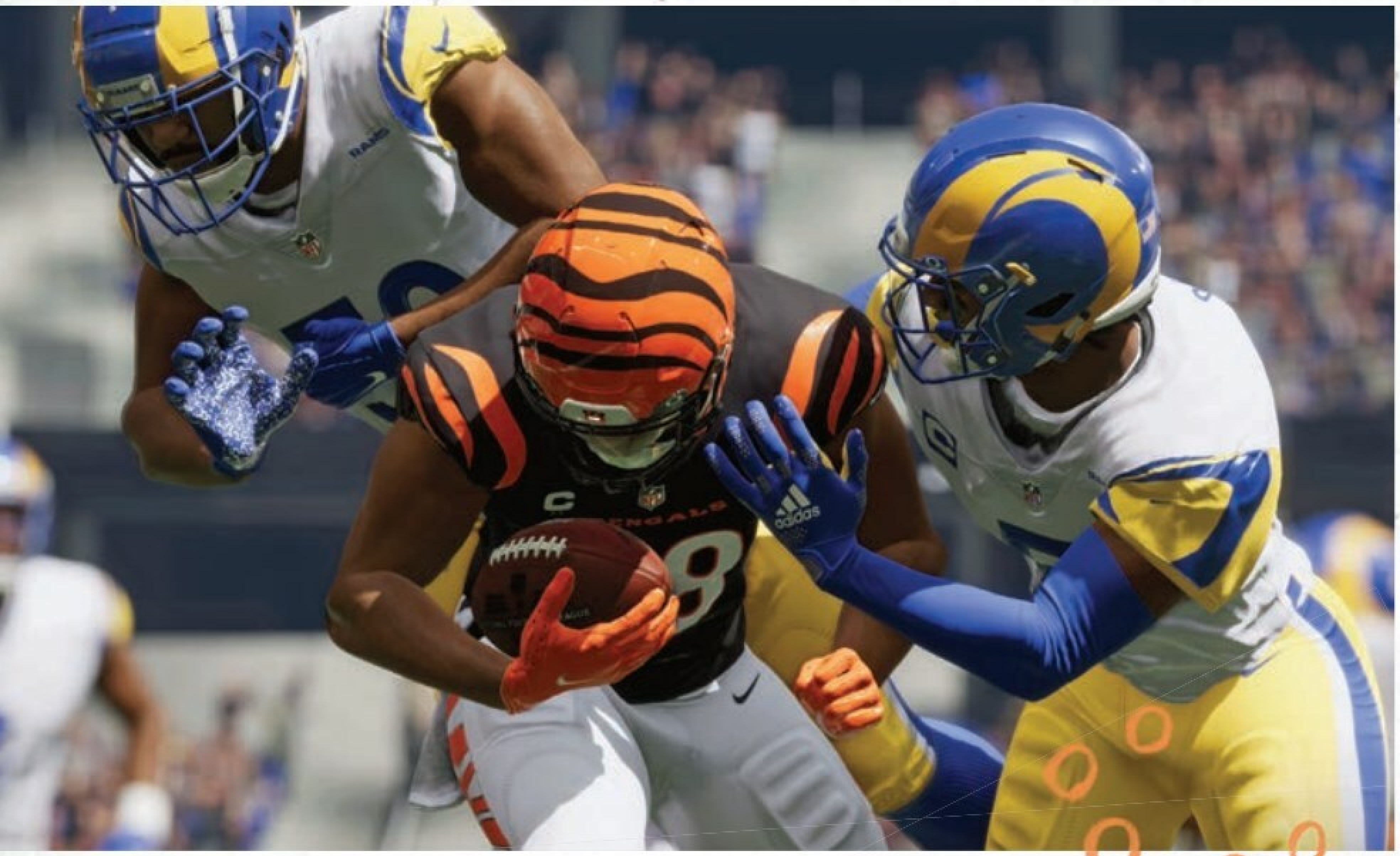
gameplay is too rooted in predetermined animations. But it also adds other benefits; FieldSense affects both sides of the ball and gives you better control of your player. For example, physics now plays a larger role in dictating the outcome of tackle attempts. Additional defenders can join midway through and influence the ball carrier's momentum, either changing the direction of the tackle or standing them up long enough for the ball to be stripped out of their grasp. For defensive backs, this new system means they can now knock the balls loose from receivers in midair and push receivers out of bounds to cause an incomplete pass.

On the other side of the line, ball carriers now have access to 360° cuts, offering sharp turns when you hold down the left trigger. This is particularly useful for trying to hit a newly formed running lane. However, the biggest change FieldSense offers the offense is the new skill-based passing mechanic for quarterbacks. This new system lets you thread the needle to deliver the pass exactly where you want it. When you drop back to pass and press the button corresponding with the receiver you wish to target, a small circle will appear on the field with a targeting reticle. Using the stick, you can choose exactly where you want to place the ball within the targeting circle, guaranteeing the receiver a chance to catch the ball. If you hold the left trigger while placing your pass, you can cause the targeting reticle to leave the circle for riskier passes. Quarterbacks also receive a new passing meter letting you control the power and trajectory of your throws by timing the meter correctly.

During my hands-on time, these improvements were immediately noticeable. On offense, the difference in how a ball carrier cuts while holding down the trigger versus how they control traditionally (now, when you don't hold down the trigger) is night and day. Sprinting up the middle with my running back afforded me more control over how I could cut through the lanes presented by my blockers, while putting the ball in the hands of Lamar Jackson let me mess around with both the skill-based passing and the 360° cuts mechanics.

Speaking of mobile quarterbacks like Jackson, EA also tuned how defenses react to them, making escaping the pocket to roll out for a pass along the sidelines more difficult. In addition, the Escape Artist ability has been nerfed and turned into an X-Factor, making it less overpowered and less commonly used.

FieldSense may be in its first year with Madden NFL 23, but it adds a lot to the core experience of playing a football game. If this year's iteration delivers, this could put the Madden series back on track. However, EA isn't stopping there. It's introducing myriad other improvements and features to give players a better overall experience.



CONTINUING TO FIX FRANCHISE

After a social media movement by fans encouraged EA to pour more time and resources into Franchise mode over the last couple of years, the studio continues its commitment to pay more attention to this mode. This year, Madden NFL 23 adds to free agency so interactions with players are more dynamic.

Players now feature special motivations, like wanting to play close to their hometown, for a Super Bowl contender, or in a state with no income tax, boosting your chances of signing them if you satisfy their desired conditions. Some wide receivers might want to play with an elite quarterback, which is determined by Franchise mode's new tags system.

These tags, specific to players and dynamic to your progress, affect how free agency plays out, but some confer bonuses on and off the field. For example, while the "Franchise Quarterback" tag might attract a star wide receiver to your team, the "Mentor" tag grants additional experience to all players in that position group when they're in your locker room. Thanks to a redesigned free agency hub, you have all the information needed to determine a player's worth, including motivations, tags, scheme fit, interest in your team, market value, and how many other teams are talking to them.

Meanwhile, modes like Face of the Franchise and Ultimate Team also receive

updates. Face of the Franchise lets you take control of an established NFL player (meaning no more high school or college experience) in a true player-lock mode across five positions: quarterback, running back, wide receiver, middle linebacker, and this year's addition, cornerback. Ultimate Team adds more efficient menus and set-creation tools, more live-service elements, and more apparent paths to progression. And, of course, all these modes benefit from the additions of FieldSense, creating what EA hopes will be the best, most well-rounded football experience it's ever made.

CALLING THE RIGHT PLAYS

Not unlike a team pushing down the field to try for a last-second score with its two-minute offense, Madden NFL 23 feels like a critical driver for the trajectory of the long-running football franchise. After spending a day at EA talking to the team and playing the game, I feel more hopeful about Madden NFL 23 than I have for other recent entries.

All these changes feel exceptionally positive both on paper and in action. However, when you add in the introduced mechanics and features from last year, such as Gameday Atmosphere, momentum, and the other strides delivered through Franchise mode, the game feels like it's on the right track for a better year. If Madden NFL 23 can deliver on the many promises and potential of this year's game, this could be the bounce-back entry the series sorely needs. ■

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MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

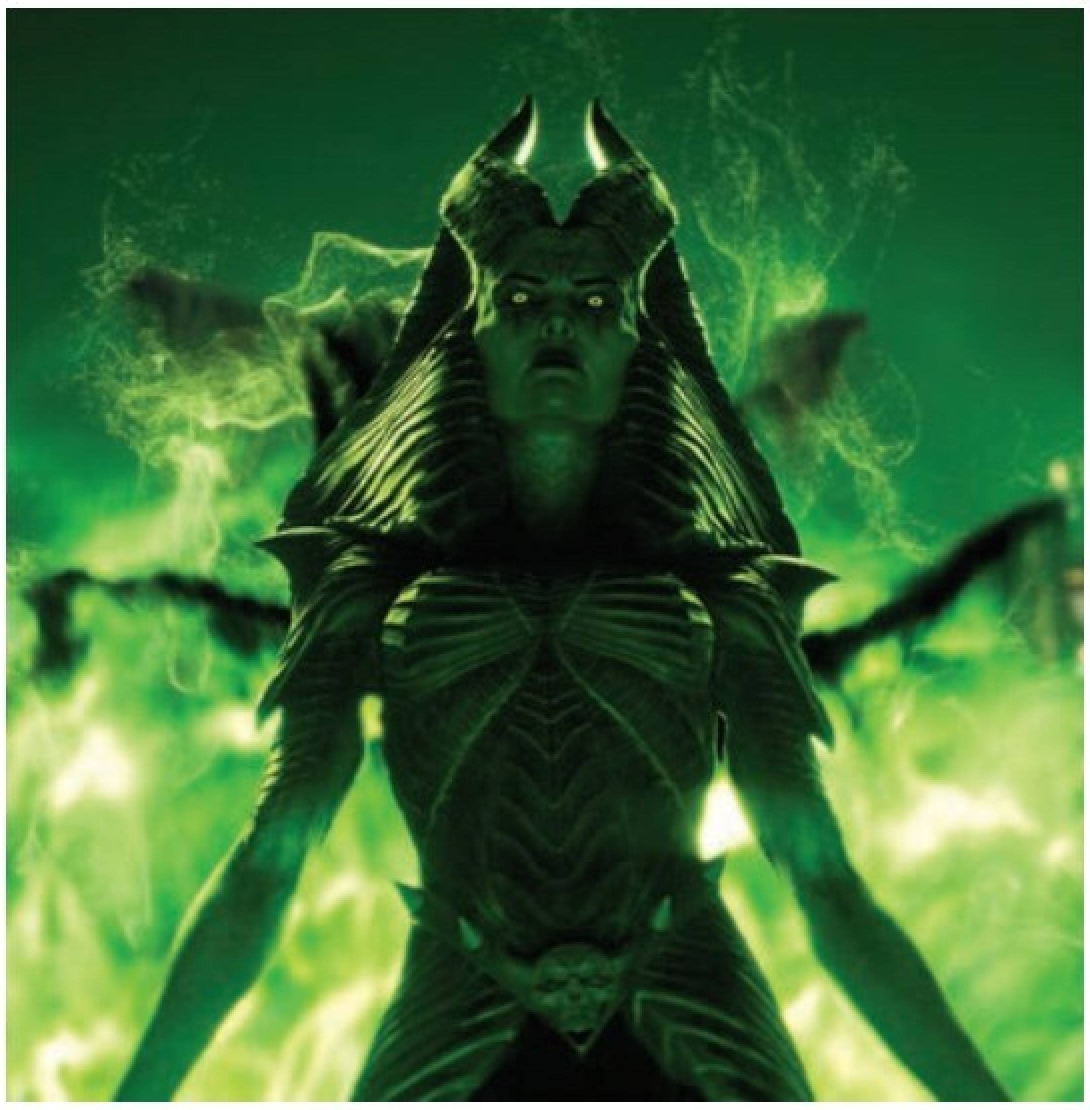
House of the rising suns

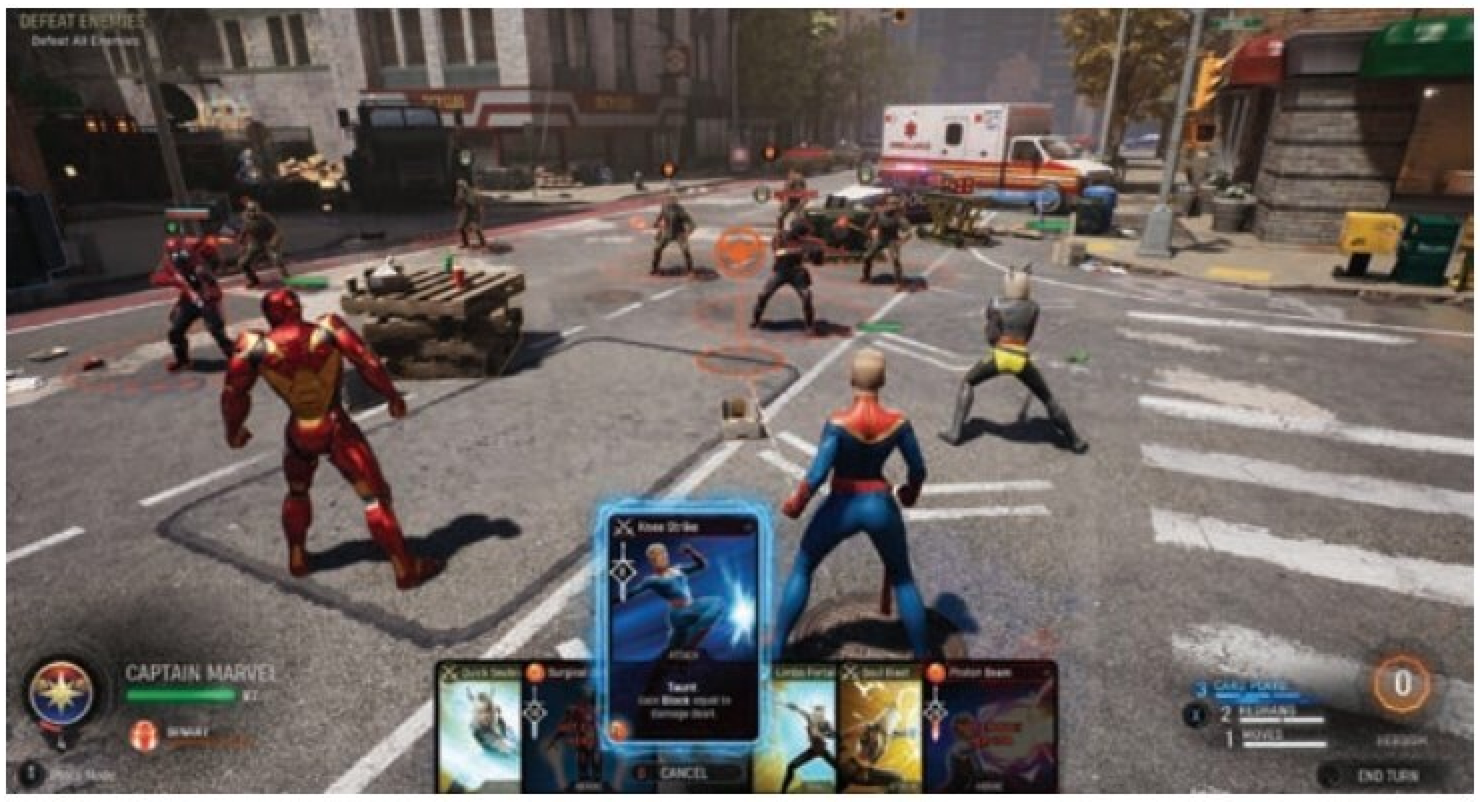
Marvel's Midnight Suns is one of the most exciting and intriguing superhero games on the horizon. Firaxis, developer of XCOM, applies its strategic talent to a role-playing adventure assembling Marvel's popular and lesser-known saviors to combat a demonic threat. We recently visited the studio to play the game for a few hours and meet its newest do-gooders.

For the unfamiliar, the game's story reimagines the '90s Rise of the Midnight Sons comic event. The change from "Sons" to "Suns" has narrative significance and is gender-neutral to reflect the team's female members. Occult heroes such as Blade, Nico Minoru, and Magik team up with Avengers such as Iron Man, Captain Marvel, and the newly revealed Spider-Man and Scarlet Witch to battle a resurrected Lilith, the mother of all demons. Players control an original customizable character called The Hunter, Lilith's only child, who wields the power of light and darkness. They're the key to ending their mother's reign of terror.

Midnight Suns isn't a Marvel-skinned XCOM; its gameplay best resembles a turn-based RPG with card-based combat. Players command up to three heroes on open battlefields – so long, grid-based movement – and utilize card-based abilities. Cards come in three types: damage-dealing Attack cards, Skill cards sporting numerous effects, and powerful Heroism cards executing flashy special attacks. Hero decks contain up to eight cards and must carry a certain number of each type. You have three actions per turn and can redraw a card twice. Lastly, you can move a single character once a turn.

Firaxis recognizes the card aspect carries negative perceptions and said it chose the system for its unpredictability. You never know what combination of powers you'll draw, and I enjoyed concocting ever-changing strategies for the most optimal plays. Performing actions fills a meter spent on activating spectacular Heroic moves, such as Ghost Rider summoning his Hell Charger to plow through multiple targets.





Unlike XCOM, Midnight Suns isn't about weighing success percentages or managing losses. You can revive fallen heroes, there's no permadeath, and actions always succeed. Despite being comparatively simpler than XCOM, Midnight Suns sports a lot of depth rewarding thoughtful play, especially since every hero performs differently. Spider-Man can immobilize enemies with his webs, and a Spider-sense card boosts his speed. One of my favorites, Magik manipulates the battlefield via creating portals that send foes hurtling anywhere on the map – including head-first into their teammates or environmental hazards if you're savvy. Not to be outdone, Ghost Rider conjures hellish pits that instantly KO the unlucky souls who plummet into them. These abilities rock on their own, but combining talents is even better. For example, nothing feels cooler than using Magik's portals as a one-way ticket into Ghost Rider's pits.

A large chunk of Midnight Suns unfolds at the Abbey, the team's headquarters. This large explorable hub contains plenty to do; I spent a lot of time searching for tarot cards, solving environmental puzzles, finding paintings to decorate rooms, and unlocking new areas using exploration-based powers.

Socializing with heroes, dubbed the Friendship System, increases your bond with them. The stronger the relationship, the more you learn about someone, and that character may also receive favorable combat bonuses. Special hangouts offer the best method of ingratiating yourself. I spent a night playing video games with Robbie Reyes while he confided about his relationship with his kid brother. You can be cordial with everyone, but Firaxis states players only have time to max out relationships with three or four characters, so you'll have to play favorites. Conversely, you can be a jerk. Either attitude earns points for the light and darkness-themed skill trees.

This downtime also reveals that Midnight Suns is more lighthearted than its heavy metal-inspired aesthetic lets on. The game retains Marvel's signature sense of humor, from listening to Doctor Strange and Tony Stark bicker over technology vs. magic to owning a lovable (and pet-able) demon dog. A Twitter-like social media app exemplifies this as the team banters about things from the mission to bathroom hygiene.

According to Firaxis, delaying Midnight Suns allowed the team to focus on applying additional layers of polish, and the game looks more ready for primetime than when we last saw it. We look forward to bringing down Lilith and hanging out with Marvel's brightest – and darkest – heroes when Midnight Suns launches October 7. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** 2K Games
DEVELOPER Firaxis **RELEASE** October 7

MULTIVERSUS

Backlot brawlers

Player First Games is well on its way to releasing its new fighting game, MultiVersus. This multiplayer platform brawler pits the extensive list of characters from the Warner Bros. catalog against one another in chaotic button-mashing battles. It's easy to compare MultiVersus to Nintendo's juggernaut Super Smash Bros., but after spending a handful of hours throwing fists, kicks, and eye lasers with the WB crew, there's plenty that impressed me. MultiVersus is a game to keep your eye on this year.

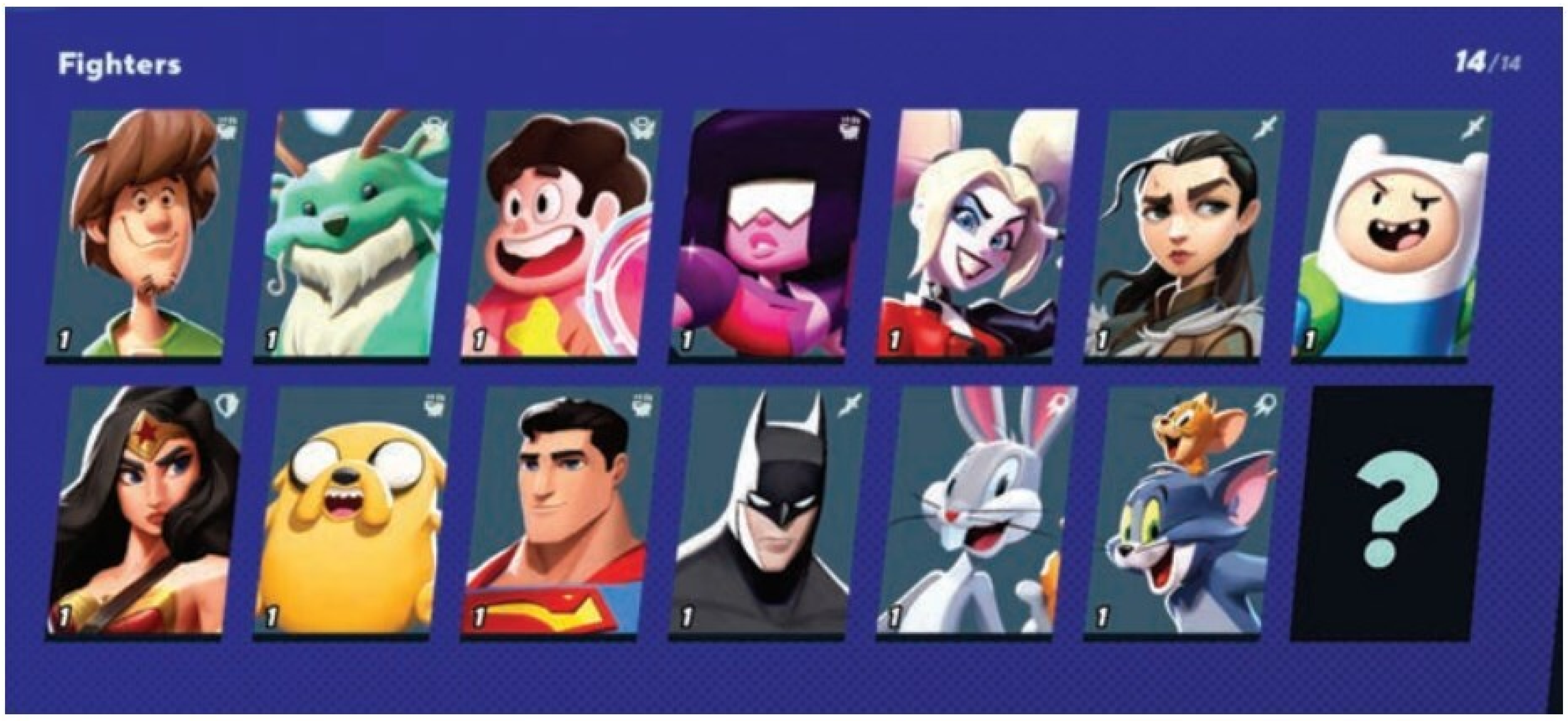
MultiVersus differs from games like Super Smash Bros. Ultimate and Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl in its focus on team battles. 2v2 is the game's primary mode, with characters filling roles to create optimal pairings. Fighters are separated into classes representing their optimal style of play. Batman is a brawler, Game of Thrones' Arya Stark is an assassin, Bugs Bunny is a mage, Superman is a tank, and Steven Universe plays support. A tank class like Wonder Woman heroically protects her partner when danger flares up, while mages strike at a distance, sometimes with tricky traps or projectiles. Supports work in a couple different ways, from offering their bodies as throwable weapons to using moves that ensure the safety of a teammate. Other supports like Steven throw shields on their teammate or buff their abilities. It's fun trying disparate combinations out and seeing what synergies work well in practice.

Each roster member has a suite of perks you equip to modify various aspects of gameplay to make a character your own. For instance, Superman has a perk giving him and any teammates a triple jump when meeting certain conditions, while Taz boosts his team's damage output when using moves that knock enemies back. I enjoy the changes perks bring to the table, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about potential perk abuse that could break the game's meta for even the most casual of players online.

While I am impressed by a lot of what MultiVersus offers, the combat isn't quite as impactful as it needs to be. Attacks feel like they barely budge an opponent at times, making it hard to know whether landing one more solid hit will put the final nail in the coffin. I'd also like to see more forceful strikes in general; even Superman's haymakers feel like he's punching a pillow.

MultiVersus is a free-to-play game and will have microtransactions and a battle pass. However, game director Tony Huynh assures me you can only earn gameplay-related things by playing the game. That means unlocking characters by cashing in gold you earn in fights, and the same goes for perks. You may have to pay real money for cosmetics, including character skins, knock-out animations, and swappable announcer voice pack and taunts. However, there's a lot to unlock in the battle pass and character reward tracks that allow for plenty of free goodies.

I went into the alpha test of MultiVersus with low expectations. Besides Smash Bros., the big brand mash-up fighters feel hollow, with underwhelming rosters. But so far, I'm impressed with MultiVersus. The cast is great; each character brings unique gameplay and mechanics to the fray. It's apparent in the detailed animations and star-studded voice cast (Kevin Conroy as Batman, Matthew Lillard as Shaggy, Maisie Williams as Arya) that the creators put plenty of care into implementing these beloved franchise icons and doing them justice. **BY JOHN CARSON**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Fighting (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Games
DEVELOPER Player First Games **RELEASE** 2022

A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM

Crawling with good looks

We've seen gorgeous screenshots and trailers for Asobo Studio's sequel, A Plague Tale: Requiem, but going hands-on with its Tribeca Festival demo confirmed the new-gen graphics are a beautiful and grotesque sight to behold. I also sat down with the game's team to dig into some of the demo's gritty details. Based on these experiences, fans should be ready for a dramatic adventure with our heroes Hugo and Amicia, expanded combat, and lots and lots of rats.

My demo begins several hours into Requiem and kicks off with Hugo undergoing a mysterious and excruciating medical procedure. Desperate to do anything to help, his sister Amicia sets off in search of herbs to help the ailing boy. Stepping out into a butcher's district street, Amicia is surrounded by all the sequel's repulsive richness.

A stream of blood, mud, and other indistinguishable liquids pours down the middle of the uneven cobblestones. The rough stone of the houses, Amicia's damp leather apparel, and the vendor's rotting meat slabs shine with remarkable authenticity. This smorgasbord of grotesque and beautiful is something the developer focused on as a way to represent the reality of medieval life and the characters' mental state.

"In the level you've played, Amicia starts to be a bit tense about what they are trying to do to help Hugo, and so we put them immediately in the creepiest, stickiest, disgusting thing representing her state of mind," says game director Kevin Choteau.

That horrible place turns out to be a festering, knee-deep pit filled with decaying flesh where the nearby butchers dispose of unwanted waste. Even worse, the pair emerge to find swarms of predatory rodents feeding on the bodies of townsfolk inexplicably murdered by guards. This is where I try out the meat of Requiem's gameplay. Like the first game, the action mainly revolves around getting through each level undetected by hostile soldiers or rats. And there's no shortage of rats.

"We wanted to increase the number of rats with the new-gen," says Choteau. "We have pushed the limits again. We had 5,000 rats in the first [game] maximum, and now we have 300,000 on the screen. So, we have taken advantage of the technology."

Luckily, Amicia has an array of tools to exterminate her foes. More knowledgeable in alchemy this time around, she can ignite or extinguish fires that keep the rodents at bay with the right concoctions. These can be thrown by hand, in a jar to widen the area of effect, or shot in her trusty sling to increase range.

Conveniently, I can craft alchemic ammo on the go, as long as I have the resources for it. If materials run out, I can always fall back on my never-ending supply of rocks to tackle threats from mice or men. Though this feels familiar, combat is undoubtedly evolving in Requiem. "Amicia is much more prepared, I would say. She's ready to fight, and she will have to," Choteau says. One dramatic example of this battle-readiness comes at the end of the demo, where a blood-thirsty Amicia takes her rage out on a disturbing number of guards. Armed only with a sling, chemicals, and one-use knives, the realistic scope of Requiem's combat sets it apart. However, its focus on an authentic experience also means I can't go into the fight sling-blazing – even though that would be much easier and perhaps more entertaining. Upgrading equipment and skills – divided into stealth, combat, and alchemy – will hopefully make for smoother encounters in the future.

A Plague Tale: Requiem debuts in a few months. Though we may have to wait and see how the title's action develops throughout the adventure, its eye-catching graphics and engrossing story should excite new-gen platform owners. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Focus Entertainment
DEVELOPER Asobo Studio **RELEASE** October 18

GOTHAM KNIGHTS

Birds of a feather

Until now, updates on Gotham Knights have been few and far between. But with its release coming in October, Warner Bros. Montreal is starting to peel back the curtains. A lengthy gameplay demo debuted recently, showing the two members of the playable Bat-Family, Nightwing and Red Hood, as they team up to deliver vigilante justice.

Nightwing used to be an acrobat by trade, and it shows as he uses agile flips to move around the battlefield, closing the distance swiftly and bashing enemies with his batons. He can also cause elemental damage with his special moves. For example, Elemental Shockwave temporarily applies a cryo status, which freezes foes and takes them out of the fight. While on the lookout for criminal activity, Nightwing maneuvers around the skies of Gotham, hanging from a glider he calls "The Flying Trapeze." It's a great name and a nod to his past life as a circus performer in "The Flying Graysons."

Red Hood commands more mystical elements, allowing him to leap off of a physical manifestation of his soul energy to traverse mid-air, a side effect of being resurrected in the Lazarus Pit. Rather than Nightwing's up-close approach, Red Hood literally sticks to his guns. He keeps his distance in combat, using dual pistols and other munitions to shoot Gotham's thugs with non-lethal hardware. That's not to say he won't break a dude's face with a good old-fashioned punch. When he does get within arms reach, Red Hood can slap a bomb on an opponent, shoot to detonate, and damage a whole group of surrounding ne'er-do-wells.

When these two and their other playable compatriots, Batgirl and Robin, aren't striking fear into the hearts of villainy, they're spending time in the Belfry. It's the base of operations for the Knights, where you use the Bat-computer to view a map of the city, activate challenges, and advance the story, building the relationships between the team members. Some items around the base will lead to conversations, like Nightwing and Red Hood commiserating over the loss of Batman and coming to grips with moving on without their shared mentor. The Belfry is also where you craft new gear, items, and outfits for your heroes, powering them up and giving them cool new cosmetic appearances to wear on patrol.

A good chunk of a story mission was shown, with Nightwing sneaking into Gotham's Powers Club searching for information on the shadowy Court of Owls. The Owls are a longstanding shadow organization pulling the strings throughout Gotham, and the Knights are chasing a lead right into dangerous territory. Keeping to the shadows, Nightwing displays his aptitude for stealth and employs swift takedown attacks to eliminate trouble before being noticed. Augmented reality vision illuminates clues and helpful information within close proximity – a feature similar to Detective Vision from the Batman: Arkham games. The former Robin soon comes to blows with members of the Court of Owls in the catacombs below the club, including a knockdown, drag-out fight with the super-powered Talon Gladiator. It takes some planning and strategy to avoid getting knocked out by the brute's strength.

Even this extended look at Gotham Knights feels like we've only scratched the surface. But it leaves me intrigued and hopeful to see more in the coming months before it launches on new-gen consoles and PC in October. **BY JOHN CARSON**

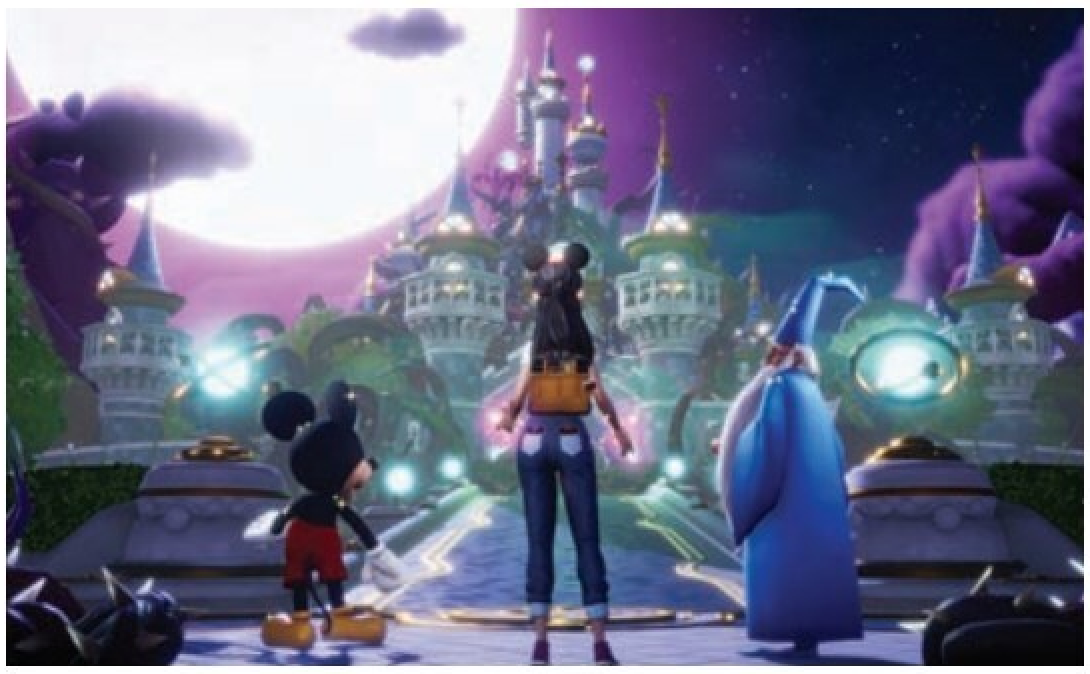
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Games
DEVELOPER Warner Bros. Montreal
RELEASE October 25

DISNEY DREAMLIGHT VALLEY

Building your own Disney world

Every year, millions of people flock to Disney theme parks around the world to meet beloved characters and relive their favorite films. Gameloft wants to bring that excitement into the gaming world with its recently announced free-to-play game Disney Dreamlight Valley.

The life-simulation adventure game lets you create your own avatar and design your own world. However, it's best to think of Disney Dreamlight Valley as a hybrid experience. You have a main narrative path where you discover why the world fell into darkness and its inhabitants lost their memories. This plays like an adventure game, with mysteries and puzzles to solve. Gameloft compared it to LucasArts games like Monkey Island and Indiana Jones.



The other part of the game is the life simulation aspect, where you're cleaning up the world and constantly building upon it. It begins with your own house to customize and upgrade. So far, the game has 1,000 decoration items, allowing you to create everything from a *Monsters Inc.*-themed living room to a *Little Mermaid*-centric bathroom. You can even design your own clothes. Mostly, you spend your days harvesting crops, mining materials, fishing, and taming animals, which helps with cooking and crafting. As you complete story segments, iconic Disney and Pixar characters will move into your neighborhood, complete with their own side stories and daily routines.

Right now, monetization is still in flux for the free-to-play game. Gameloft is looking to Early Access players to help inform its direction but assured us monetization focuses purely on cosmetic items. Early Access hits this summer; you can participate by purchasing a Founders Pack or by being an Xbox Game Pass member. So far, Disney Dreamlight Valley looks like a promising way for fans to live out their Disney dreams. **BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC • Mac **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Disney Interactive Studios **DEVELOPER** Gameloft **RELEASE** 2023

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OXENFREE II: LOST SIGNALS

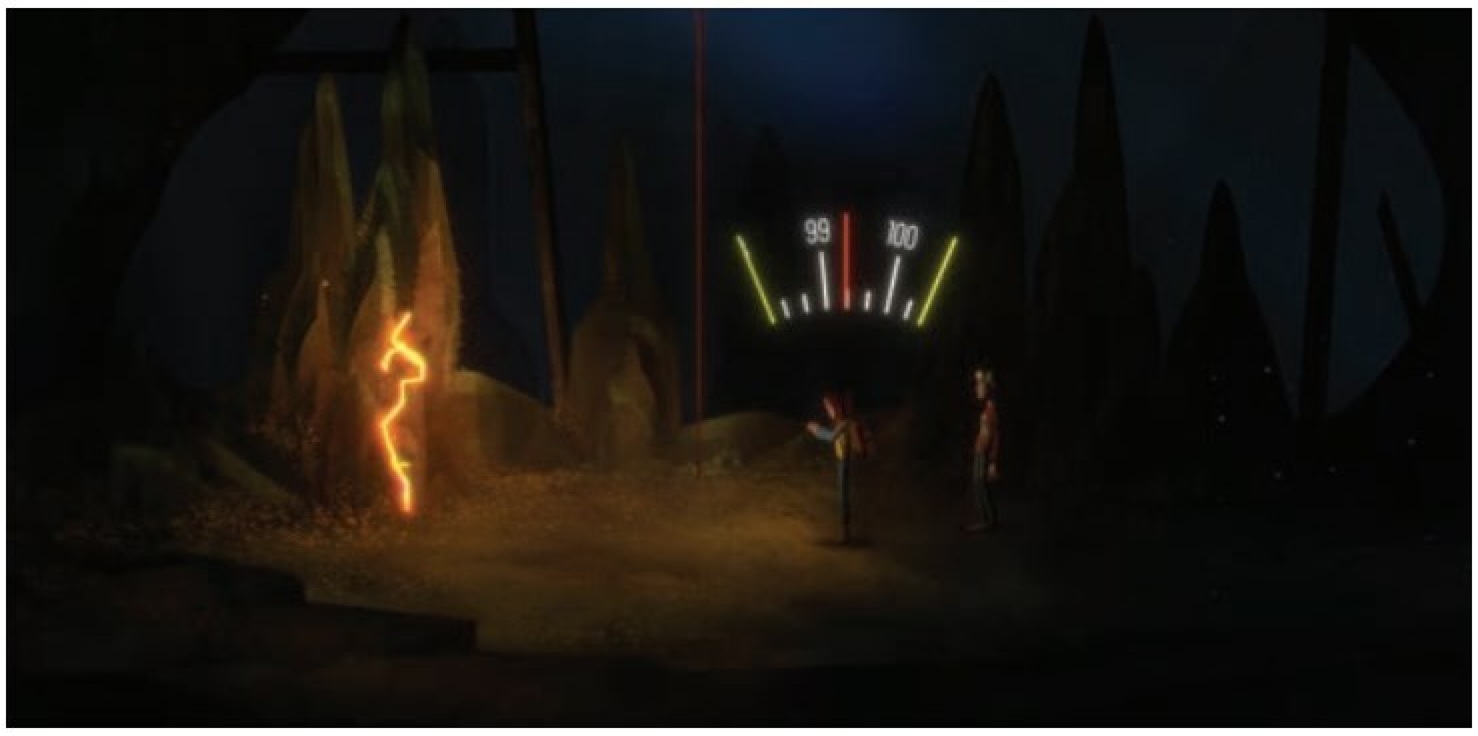
A strange and familiar frequency

A scenic green hill sits under a starry night. The sounds of ocean waves and whirling wind weave in and out of the background. At the hill's summit, a sheer cliff offers dramatic views of the dark sea to a lonely structure. Unlike the rest of the darkened scene, the building's roof glows eerily in the moonlight.

Right from the starting screen, Oxenfree II's hand-drawn visuals pull me back into Night School Studio's unsettling world, and I remember the unique blend of unnerving awe and humor that made the developer's first game so remarkable. Alongside playing a demo, I also got a chance to speak with its creators, who gave me even more insight into the surreal experience.

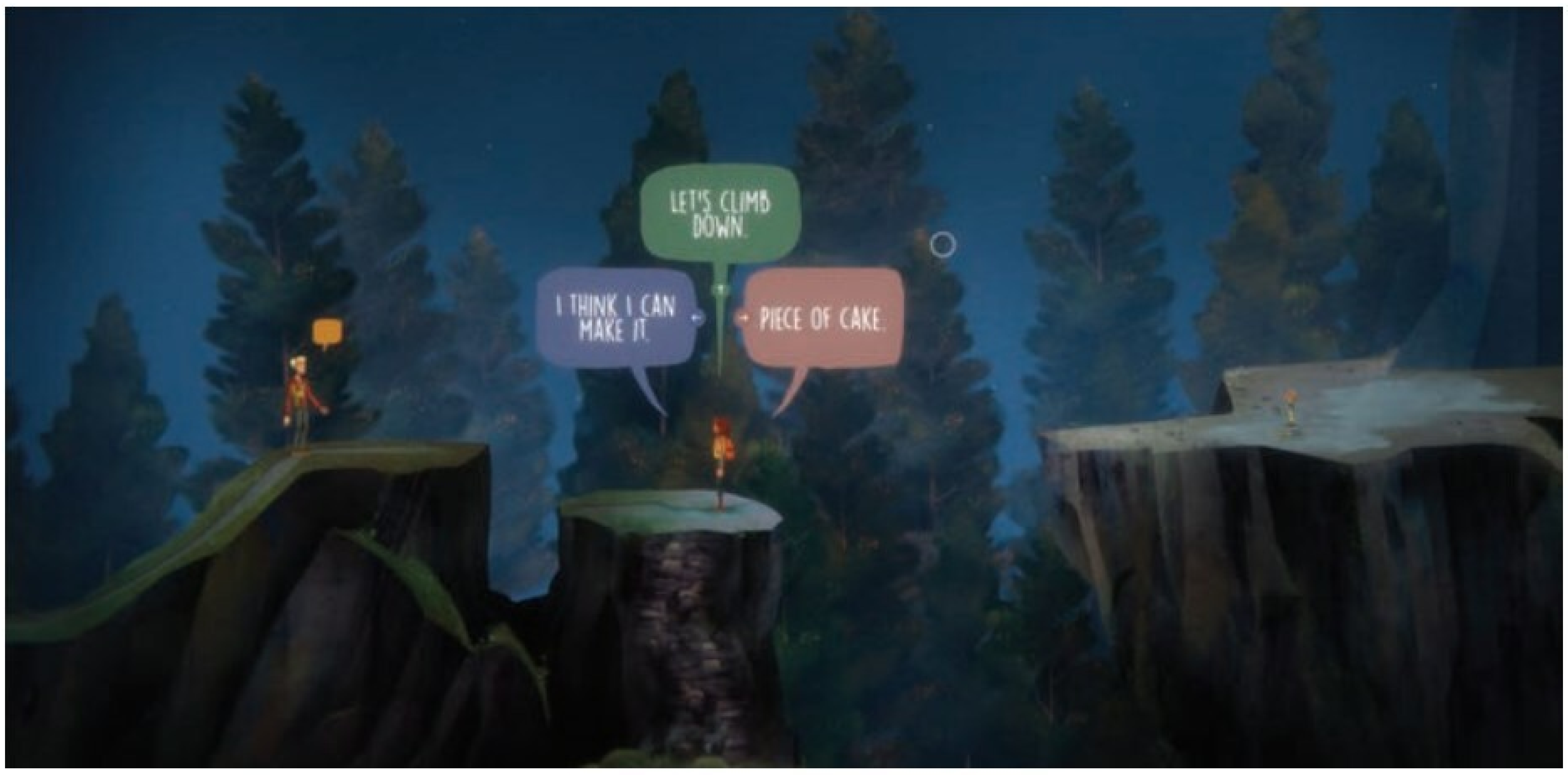
I control Riley, who, along with her companion Jacob, has recently traveled back to her home in a seaside community on the coast of Camena. But it's not a pleasure trip. The first Oxenfree centers around bizarre events on the nearby Edwards Island. "Now it appears that the effects of the island are actually starting to bleed and get into the coast of Camena," says lead writer and Night School Studio co-founder Adam Hines. The sequel's protagonists find themselves traversing the shore's craggy trails in the dark to figure out what's going on, and this is where the demo kicks off.

Like the original, Oxenfree II's exploration works like a 2D side-scroller. Mechanically simplistic, gameplay consists mostly of walking through lovely visuals, interacting with important features, and choosing between various dialogue options. The formula, and Night School's characteristic writing, feels fittingly familiar. Early in my preview, I fail to jump a gap and plummet onto the rocks below. I can respond to Jacob's worried calls with three options ranging from sincere to clever. I pick the latter, cursing whoever invented gravity, and, following my lead, Jacob disparages Isaac Newton as we travel on.



But mechanics and dialogue aren't the only things Oxenfree II has in common with its predecessor. Without getting into spoilers, the original game delves into some disquieting depths, and the sequel is no different. Emerging from a cave, the landscape becomes inexplicably shrouded in fog. An unknown man's voice reaches out over Riley's radio, insisting she knows him but refusing to identify himself. The voice says he'll give her space to figure out who he is. He then mentions he knows what will happen that night because his mom already told him the story. There are obviously some time-related shenanigans going on.

Foolishly, I thought that would be the oddest scene in my short hands-on experience. However, I soon spy my own body floating in a cave pool, which disappears before Jacob can see it. Then a multicolored rift in the fabric of reality crackles into existence. Of course, I walk into it. The cave transforms around me while the date "1899" shows onscreen. Jacob likens the time-bending fissure to a "temporal anomaly" in the sky, meaning our heroes have previously run into this kind of thing. And according to the developers, the most bizarre events are yet to come. "There are so many weird scenes in [Oxenfree II] that I wish I could tell you about right now," says studio director and co-founder Sean Krankel. "But there are definite conversations we've had internally, where I just crack up, and I'm like, 'I can't believe we put that in there.'"



Oxenfree II: Lost Signals comes out later this year, and the developers stress that the sequel is noticeably larger in scope than the first. While the original game took about five hours to beat, Lost Signals could take anywhere from eight to twelve. The preview was a fraction of that time, lasting about 20 minutes, but it has me excited to jump back into Oxenfree's supernatural universe. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Netflix
DEVELOPER Night School Studio
RELEASE 2022

STRAY

Bite and scratch and scream all night

I don't like cats. Which makes it ironic that one of the games I'm looking forward to most this year is Stray – an adorable-looking game about, well, a stray cat.

I recently saw about 30 minutes in a hands-off demo led by the developers. They showed off numerous levels showcasing exploration, puzzle-solving, platforming, and even outrunning dangerous enemies.

Since its reveal many years ago – nearly seven, if you're being exact – Stray's world has been a consistent talking point. Inspired by the real-world, now-destroyed Kowloon Walled City – an ungoverned enclave most notable for its strikingly dense architecture and population – it constantly emphasizes verticality. Aesthetically, it looks like most cyberpunk video games – neon, dirty, retro-futuristic, etc. But the way the geometry allows for unique feline exploration sets it apart.

Ledges, awnings, small holes, and anything you could picture a mischievous cat climbing atop and around is fair game in Stray. Most interestingly, it makes me think playing the game will mean looking at level design in a wholly new way. Because you play a cat, platforms you may never think twice about or would consider inaccessible in other games become the critical path. Put more simply, the entire world becomes a jungle gym for your little furry friend.

During our demo, the developers revealed you couldn't fail platforming sections. Jumping from point A to point B is guaranteed; no need to try and measure distances or readjust in midair. At first blush, this might feel like it's removing challenge from a platform-heavy game. But on the other hand, because Stray is so focused on tiny, tiny platforms that only a cat could navigate, this feels like a nice way to bypass frustrations. And also to feel like a cat – they never seem to miss their jumps.

We spent a lot of our demo looking around the world and interacting with the various robots inhabiting it. Our little cat – who, because it's a stray, doesn't have a name – can talk to the city's numerous citizens, progressing either the main story or occasionally getting sidequests. Each level looks open, and while it's not an open-world game, exploration feels like a significant emphasis. Look around, find what areas you can squeeze into, and then reap the rewards of your curiosity, just like a real cat.

However, one of the more striking moments in our demo came from direct and deadly threats to our stray's life: giant bugs it had to outrun. Rather than just dash forward while the scene plays out, a chase ensues. The feline protagonist ran around the environment – sometimes literally in circles – and up and over obstacles trying to throw pursuers off course. It's a genuinely exciting moment – especially compared to pre-scripted chases in other video games – and I can't wait to experience it first-hand.

Stray is the next in line from publisher Annapurna Interactive's stable of quirky indie-adjacent video games. And the game, both for Annapurna and in general, feels like a breath of fresh air. Perhaps it's just the novelty of playing as a cat. Whatever the case may be, when Stray is finally released on July 19, I'll be very curious to check out the final product. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER BlueTwelve **RELEASE** July 19

FOREVER SKIES

It's Earth, but not yours anymore

Forever Skies is Far From Home's first-person survival game set on a decrepit procedurally-generated Earth, abandoned to waste away in ruin. Players will leave the safety of planetary orbit to explore an Earth covered in toxic dust following an ecological disaster in hopes of learning more about its demise and uncovering secrets that could save the human race. The game's reveal got straight to the point: humans messed Earth up and failed to do what was needed to save it. Sound familiar?

I spoke to Far From Home CEO and gameplay lead Andrzej Blumenfeld about the premise, and he said it's inspired by real-world ecological problems, especially those in Poland, where the studio is based. Blumenfeld says the team often receives messages on their phones from city authorities saying things like, "if you can, just please stay at home because going outside is dangerous" due to pollution. The team, and all of the residents in the affected areas, treat the air like poison, and in Forever Skies, the air might as well be poison too.

Inspired by other survival games like Subnautica and Raft, Forever Skies tasks players with surviving on what used to be Earth to discover what happened and if the planet can be rehabilitated. At the core of the survival and exploration is a special four-in-one scientific tool. The tool can extract resources and unlock new paths, build new things like ladders, repair damaged objects, and scan the environment, which ties into the scientists' goal of analyzing what's gone wrong. This tool is critical to learning to overcome the dangers of this new Earth.

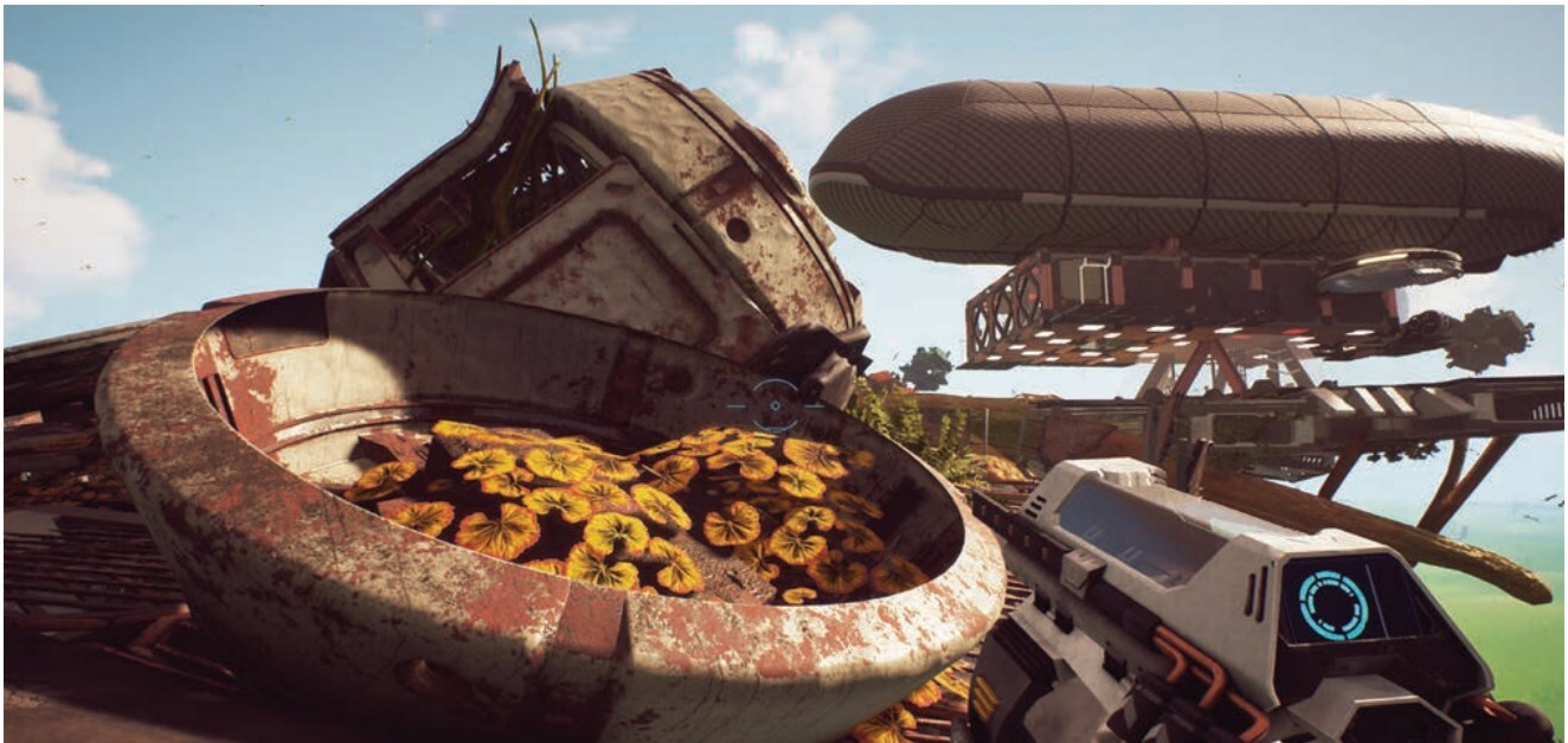
Far From Home showcased two trailers where you can see the tool in action. The footage also reveals a destroyed cityscape – think a metropolis overrun with dust and ravenous thunderstorms – presenting a level of verticality not often seen in survival games. However, Blumenfeld tells me the city isn't the only biome players encounter. Players must overcome multiple environments as well as the layer of Earth beneath the disruptive and dangerous dust. He says what's above the dust speaks directly to the ruinous status of Earth, the resources you're after, and the story of the collapse of human civilization. What's below, however, is the evolution of an Earth that doesn't belong to humans anymore.

You reach these new biomes aboard your airship, which can be customized to your liking. When starting the game, some locations are unreachable. This is how Forever Skies will push you to expand your airship's arsenal. If you want to reach that area, you need to upgrade your airship. For example, it begins with just one balloon, but a second one can be added, likely for increased verticality. In-ship upgrades, balloons, additional turbines, and more is how Far From Home aims to make your experience feel comparatively unique.

The team hopes players will guide Forever Skies' future development, although the studio has an internal roadmap that includes cooperative multiplayer, a dedicated story mode, additional locations, and extra tools, too. Early Access players can help design "artifacts from the lost world," which will be things like lost locations or collectibles for players to stumble upon while exploring a building, for example.

Forever Skies launches into Early Access on PC this year before an eventual full release on consoles and PC sometime after that. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Far From Home
DEVELOPER Far From Home **RELEASE** 2022



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: GOLLUM

Riddles in the dark

Like its titular character, Lord of the Rings: Gollum developer Daedalic Entertainment withdrew from the limelight after the game's delay to 2022. With almost half the year gone, the team recently revealed the title is set to launch September 1 and gave Game Informer a chance to check out gameplay in a hands-off demo. The preview ranged from the dark lands of Mordor to the glittering caves of Mirkwood and revealed some moment-to-moment action.

As the preview begins, the oppressive atmosphere, dark coloring, and sharp geological features make one thing clear: We're walking into Mordor. More specifically, the developers say, Cirith Ungol. Daedalic affirmed that despite the year since its last appearance, the game is still a work in progress, and it looks like it. However, with a few months left until release, the team will hopefully have time to polish the rough edges.

Entering an ominous cave, the developers show a variety of Gollum's platforming skills and other abilities. We see the sulking creature jump long distances, shimmy along ledges, and climb vine-choked cliff walls. A "Gollum sense" highlights bushy hiding places and nearby hostile creatures, one of which the protagonist incapacitates with a risky stealth takedown. Another section of the demo shows Gollum tossing a rock at a lantern next to a group of orcs, breaking it. As the light flickers out, the monstrous spider-like Shelob slinks out of the darkness to prey on Sauron's blinded servants.

In the first hint of the game's story, our unusual hero hears a wizard, later confirmed to be Gandalf, in his mind asking about his misadventures in the dark land. This sets a timeline for the story sometime before Frodo sets out on his quest to destroy the One Ring.

However, Gollum's mind harbors more than just inquisitive wizards. His dual personality pulls the player into choosing between the character's instincts to crush a beetle he thinks might be a spy for the Dark Lord and Smeagol's child-like interest in the bug. This decision doesn't seem far-reaching, but the team says later internal conflicts can greatly affect the game. The beetle might well have been a spy in this case, as a Ringwraith mounted on a winged beast soon appears.

We don't see how Gollum escapes, however, and the preview skips ahead to the elven kingdom of Mirkwood, where he's imprisoned underground. The developers explain Gollum has allied with the disgraced elf Mell, who communicates through water. She informs him the key to freedom is a magic bell kept in King Thranduil's chamber. Platforming being the main focus of this preview, Gollum scales rocky walls, jumps from ledge to ledge, and swims through waterways flooding the glittering elven caverns, which are decorated with elegant lights and tapestries. It's a far cry from Mordor's gloomy pits, and the team has done a good job infusing the landscape with the realm's spirit.

The king's chamber also allows for a little parkour before Gollum gets interrupted by Gandalf walking in with Mirkwood's ruler. The demo cuts away before we hear much of what the powerful figures say, sadly; the developers are trying to keep details of the narrative quiet for now.

As a fan of The Lord of the Rings, I'd love to play a game exploring the world's lesser-known events, and this title has made an interesting choice making the sneaky Gollum its protagonist. Whether that equates to an engaging experience is still to be seen. Judging from this preview, the visuals need refining, the gameplay lacks distinction, and the dialogue feels shoe-horned in. The Lord of the Rings: Gollum releases September 1, so it's possible the team can shine all these elements up to give fans an interesting experience. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Adventure **PUBLISHER** Daedalic Entertainment
DEVELOPER Daedalic Entertainment **RELEASE** September 1

SAINTS ROW

Refining the rampage

After a six-month delay, I worried about Saints Row, wondering why developer Volition pushed its original February release. Was it not shaping up well enough? Was it just getting out of the way of Elden Ring and Horizon Forbidden West? Whatever the reason, after seeing Saints Row in action at a recent preview event, I'm glad the team had more time to refine the experience, leaving me even more excited to get my hands on the full version.

Once again, Volition has to introduce everyone to the Saints. In this reboot, you play as The Boss and form your up-and-coming gang with the help of your roommates, who start as members of rival crime families. We got another look at missions like "Making Rent" and "Idol Threat," which you can read about in our Saints Row cover story in *Game Informer* issue 340. They both look more polished, with enhanced combat scenarios and car chases to keep the action fast-paced and interesting. However, it's what we didn't see in our cover story last year that piqued my interest.

First is the undeniably impressive customization systems that let you give The Boss – and their weapons and vehicles – their own unique flair. Everything from skin tones to hair, facial structure, size, shape, metallic sheen, voice, and more is fair game. Loadouts can be made for The Boss' character model, allowing you to swap out your appearances at the drop of a hat. One moment you can be a sleek, stylish kingpin, and the next, you could be lumbering around with green skin like a knock-off Incredible Hulk. Or maybe you prefer to look like a demonic clown. The choice is yours.

You can also give weapons a facelift with cosmetic skins. One turns the akimbo pistols into big foam fingers, while another makes them look like futuristic blasters Marvel's Star-Lord might have on hand. However, not all customizations are visual touchups; the more exciting weapons modifications come in the form of Signature Abilities that can change those same finger guns into fully automatic machine guns. Volition says there are all kinds of ways to change how each weapon fires and looks, which is a big step in the right direction to making the firearms of Saints Row more interesting than what I played with last year. Likewise, players can trick out vehicles with new paint jobs, undercarriage lights, and ejector seats to launch the Boss from behind the wheel of a car chase seamlessly into a wingsuit glide.

Volition's demo was full of other improvements and enhancements, like the ability to trigger environmental hazards in combat, extending wingsuit glides by cartoonishly bouncing off of pedestrians, and noticeable performance and animations polish. I was also impressed with the studio's foresight in connecting previously disparate game systems to feed into one another naturally. Criminal Ventures, legitimate businesses you set up around the city of Santo Ileso as fronts for more illicit dealings, are now tied into the territory control between the Saints and their rival factions. And they'll kick off power struggles wherever you decide to set up shop. It's a minor change, but it makes a big difference in my interest in both activities.

The breadth of customizations, refinements of combat systems, and having more skin in the game with Criminal Ventures make Saints Row feel more like a fully fleshed-out experience. I was already looking forward to taking over Santo Ileso, but now I'm far more excited to build out my criminal empire when the game releases in August.

BY JOHN CARSON

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Deep Silver **DEVELOPER** Volition
RELEASE August 23

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CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE II

Rally the troops!

Where were you when Infinity Ward conquered the console shooter scene with Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare and its equally revolutionary sequel? Operatives everywhere toured Chernobyl's dilapidated theme park in nothing but a ghillie suit, stumbled through the residual radioactive smog of a detonated nuclear warhead, stormed a Kazakhstan stronghold under intense blizzard cover, and saved the world with a single, well-aimed throwing knife.

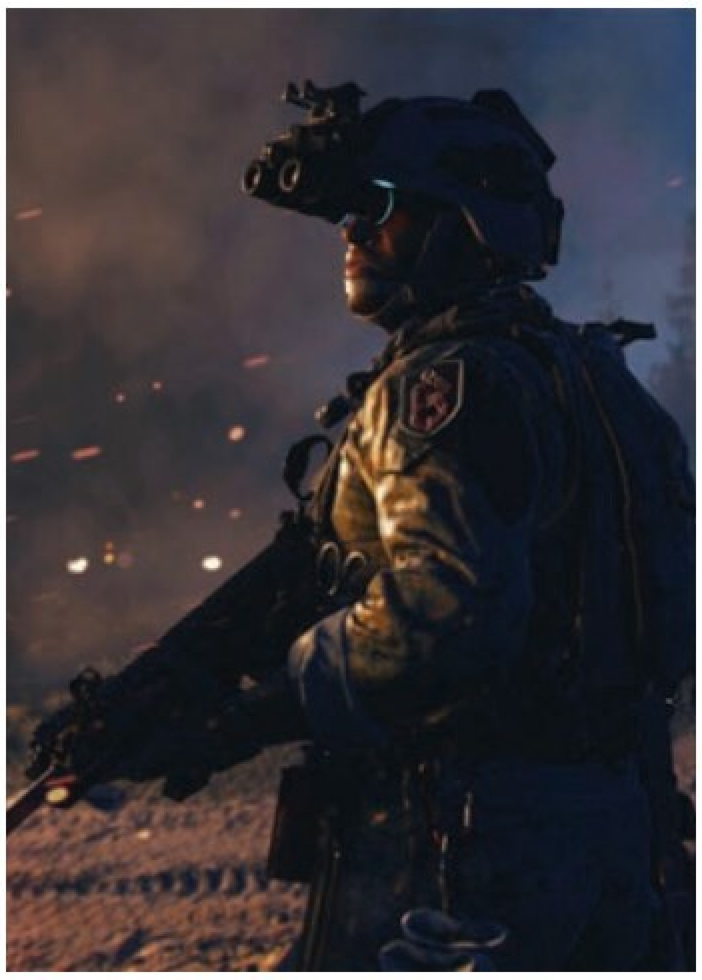
Infinity Ward's narrative team reimagined Modern Warfare by answering an important question: "How can we most successfully honor the original game and take it further without diminishing both?" The answer lies in the characters, which are more fleshed out in Modern Warfare II to parallel the studio's commitment to weaving heroic and human stories. The developers handcrafted new faces like Corporal Phillip Graves and, more specifically, Colonel Alejandro Vargas from hours of interviews and extensive research. The story is meticulously designed, from the various gameplay choices in each environment to the overarching plotline. Players will secure warzones across the globe, and, yes, the different missions will be appropriately fierce and explosive.

Modern Warfare II's gameplay is all about variety. In one campaign mission, players maneuver from vehicle to vehicle on a freeway, driving, climbing, and leaping from numerous military-grade trucks in an exhilarating loop. Players rappel down occupied skyscrapers in another, forcing them to make important positioning decisions. Should they expose their body for effortless eliminations or opt for a toe-up approach, revealing less vital points but firing from an upside-down position? These tactical choices are all about player agency. "We wanted to create an authored experience but still leave room for the player to discover what they want to do and feel," head writer Brian Bloom said.

From a multiplayer perspective, Infinity Ward focused on expanding the outcomes of PvP battles. Designers implemented bodies of water players can swim in or drive amphibious vehicles through. There is also a dive mechanic, ledge-hanging, and more specialized equipment. Tactical cameras allow players to surveil/detect enemy movements. Drill charges fire grenades through surfaces (like Fuze in Rainbow Six Siege). DDOSes are miniature EMP devices that can even affect killstreaks. And inflatable decoys are the perfect jumpscare for unwary foes.

With Warzone slated for a mobile release and Modern Warfare II launching on last and new-gen consoles alongside PC on October 28, players will have multiple avenues to access and interact with their favorite competitive FPS. **BY JASON GUISAO**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter (64-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Activision **DEVELOPER** Infinity Ward **RELEASE** October 28



REDFALL

Turning vampires to dust in style

As much as I want Arkane Studios to return to the Dishonored series, this talented developer repeatedly shows it may be better off exploring new ventures. Prey and Deathloop support this theory with thunderous success, and the studio's next experiment, Redfall, looks just as promising.

I recently sat down with Arkane Austin's studio director, Harvey Smith, and co-creative director, Ricardo Bare, to learn what players can expect from this vampire-slaying experience.

"We're taking on a giant creative challenge," Smith says. "We want to hold onto Arkane's core creative values while taking on an open-world game. It'll still have the rich narrative design accompanying every square inch like we always do."

The strong storytelling focus is evident in the first image I see of Redfall, Massachusetts. The seabed surrounding the island is dried up, with fishing boats scattered across parched sands leading up to colonial-style buildings. It all delivers the illusion of a thriving society. An eclipsed sun hovers above the city, the result of dark magic cast by vampires so they can freely walk the streets and hunt the living.

Before you investigate Redfall, you select your character. Each has unique stories to tell and approach vampire-killing differently. Layla Ellison is a biomedical engineer who volunteered for a trial and awoke with telekinetic powers. Jacob Boyer is an ex-military sharpshooter who prefers hunting from the shadows. He can also summon a spectral raven. Remi de la Rosa assumes the role of combat engineer and is never alone thanks to her robot friend Bribón. The strangest character is Devinder Crousley, a famous internet personality who traveled to Redfall to prove vampires are real. He brings Tesla-like weapons of his own design to the war.

These characters level up, gain new skills, and hunt for better weapons. True to all Arkane games, Redfall offers a single-player experience, but, in a first for Arkane, also supports four-player cooperative play. You and your friends can bring all four characters to the fight, or be the same character if that's how you want to play. "Let's imagine you and I select Devinder characters, and we squad up to play together," Bare says. "By the time we're 10 hours into the game, my Devinder probably is different than yours. I spent my skill points on different things and wear a firefighter costume."

Along with completing missions to progress the story, players must take back the city from the vampires. Redfall consists of two huge districts, each housing a variety of neighborhoods, and a player base. "We deliberately chose community houses," Smith adds. "The first one is a firehouse."

A special mission allows you to liberate a community, making that area a little safer to navigate. Taking territories also brings ramifications, but Smith and Bare wouldn't reveal what they are.

In various gameplay clips set throughout the city's streets and buildings, I see what all four characters are capable of and how Redfall's conflicts encourage varying approaches, such as stealthily sniping from rooftops or alerting enemies to create a cluster for an electrical blast. The vampires are not the romantic variety seen in a lot of fiction but instead products of science. They float, quickly dash your way or out of a hail of fire, and use claws to slash at you. In one clip, I see a tricked-out pink rifle connect with a vampire, sparks flying off its body before exploding in a storm of fire and ash. In another, one character cautiously calls out a "blood bag," which is a vampire with giant, pulsating sacks of blood on its back. The sacks explode, and the blood scent immediately lures in a vampiric horde.

The visual design of the characters and environments is similar to Dishonored's realistic-yet-cartoony aesthetic. The themes are dark, yet the world is colorful, even at night. All the characters can run, jump, sneak, and climb, but each also has unique traversal powers. Layla can create an old-school lift to reach higher ground. She can also bring up a teammate. Devinder has translocation power.

Arkane has a knack for turning genres on their heads and delivering innovative experiences. Redfall's run-and-gun gameplay looks rote at first glance but quickly takes on a different vibe when the characters give us a taste of their wild abilities.

Redfall is no longer hitting in 2022. Arkane is now aiming for the first half of next year. Despite the uncertainty in date, Smith makes it sound like the team is getting close to the finish line. "We're very clearly past our launch date," he says, laughing. "I don't know what we can say on this, but we're moving toward content lock. And after that, it's just months and months of polish."

BY ANDREW REINER

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER Arkane Studios **RELEASE** 2023

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FINAL FANTASY XVI

Iconic Eikons take center stage

After Final Fantasy XV's epic road trip, the newest numbered installment of the long-running role-playing series fully embraces medieval fantasy. If early trailers are any indication, the upcoming release also appears to be the darkest in tone and storytelling that we've seen from the franchise, with a big focus on conflict and the wars between nations.

The Eikons personify that strife, acting as the latest iteration of the familiar summons long permeating the series. In the newest trailer, we see a whole host of the towering entities, including Bahamut, Garuda, Ifrit, Odin, Phoenix, Ramuh, Shiva, and Titan. But more than mere glimpses, the most exciting reveal is how these massive forces of nature play into combat, with actual playable battles between the Eikons, in which one cataclysmic elemental attack after the next depletes each creature's health bar.

We also have greater clarity about the smaller-scale interpersonal battle system. Players control protagonist Clive Rosfield as he fights across the landscape of Valisthea. Many of Clive's skirmishes seem fueled by the elemental capabilities of the Eikons. However, the most significant shift is in the pacing of battles, which look like a crossbreed between the stylish action of Devil May Cry and the role-playing-infused exchanges of the Kingdom Hearts franchise. Clive hurtles into the fray with damage numbers cascading out around him, focusing on chaining together attacks into larger combos for increased effect. It's a notable shift for a mainline Final Fantasy title, but there's no denying the intensity of the splashy visual effects and high-intensity melees.

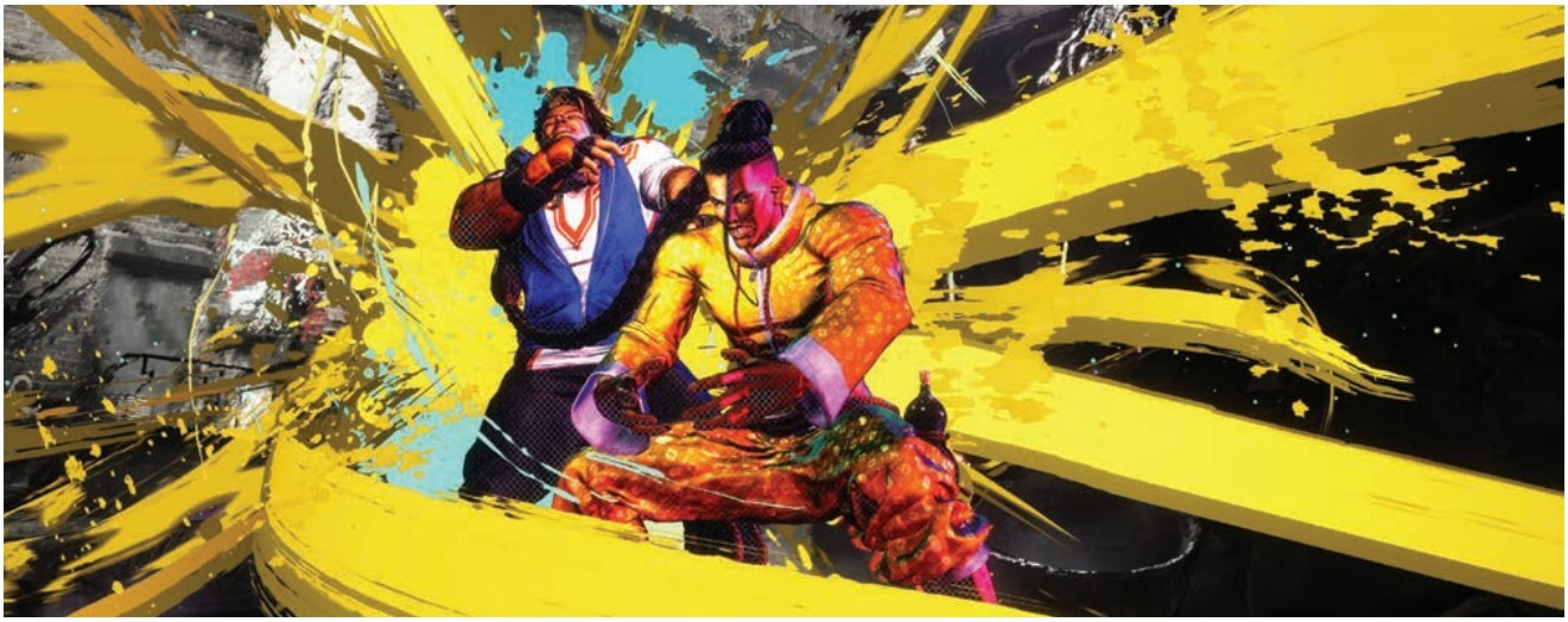
The development team shared that Final Fantasy XVI is now playable in full from beginning to end, so the next year of development is about optimization before its summer 2023 debut. Early glimpses suggest that the game takes full advantage of the horsepower in the PlayStation 5, whether through its dazzling particle effects, massive on-screen armies, or simply the speed and ferocity of gameplay. While it's not likely the most kid-friendly Final Fantasy release, it's certainly shaping up to be one of the most promising projects from Square Enix in a long time.

BY MATT MILLER

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix **RELEASE** Summer 2023

STREET FIGHTER 6

More than a splash of paint



Innovate or die. The Street Fighter developers seem to have taken those words to heart as they continually reinvent the series' visual palette and gameplay for new generations. We got a closer look at just how Capcom aims to shake up its long-standing formula in Street Fighter 6 at Sony's State of Play event in early June, and there's a lot to warrant excitement.

The first thing you'll notice is the game's striking visual style. Street Fighter 6 leverages the same RE Engine used on games like Devil May Cry 5 and Resident Evil Village. The result is highly realistic presentations of familiar characters like Ryu, Chun-Li, and Guile. But those likenesses are contrasted against gorgeous visual effects that bring their martial arts to life, expressed as splashes of paint-like color as the action heats up and the big hits start swinging. It's impressive and arresting.

Alongside new visuals, Street Fighter 6 separates into three core experiences. World Tour is a new single-player story mode where characters roam freely through various environments advancing the narrative. A second central experience is the Battle Hub, a social and communication nexus for players.

But the latest glimpse provided the most extensive information on the third pillar – Fighting Ground. Here, players find most of the familiar modes from previous games, including arcade, online matches, training, and local versus.

Expect an array of new twists on the formula within these game modes. A classic control type includes the same input mechanics veteran players expect. But a new modern control type vastly simplifies the experience while still allowing the flashy feats that have long helped the series shine. In this new control scheme, combining a single button press with a single directional input results in a special move.

For players ready to push past simplicity, a new Drive System enhances both offensive and defensive capabilities, some of which replicate the EX moves of previous franchise installments. Other drive moves allow for counterattacks, the ability to absorb an attack and enact a wall splat, or even a rush forward to surprise opponents, among other new twists. Each uses a portion of your drive gauge.

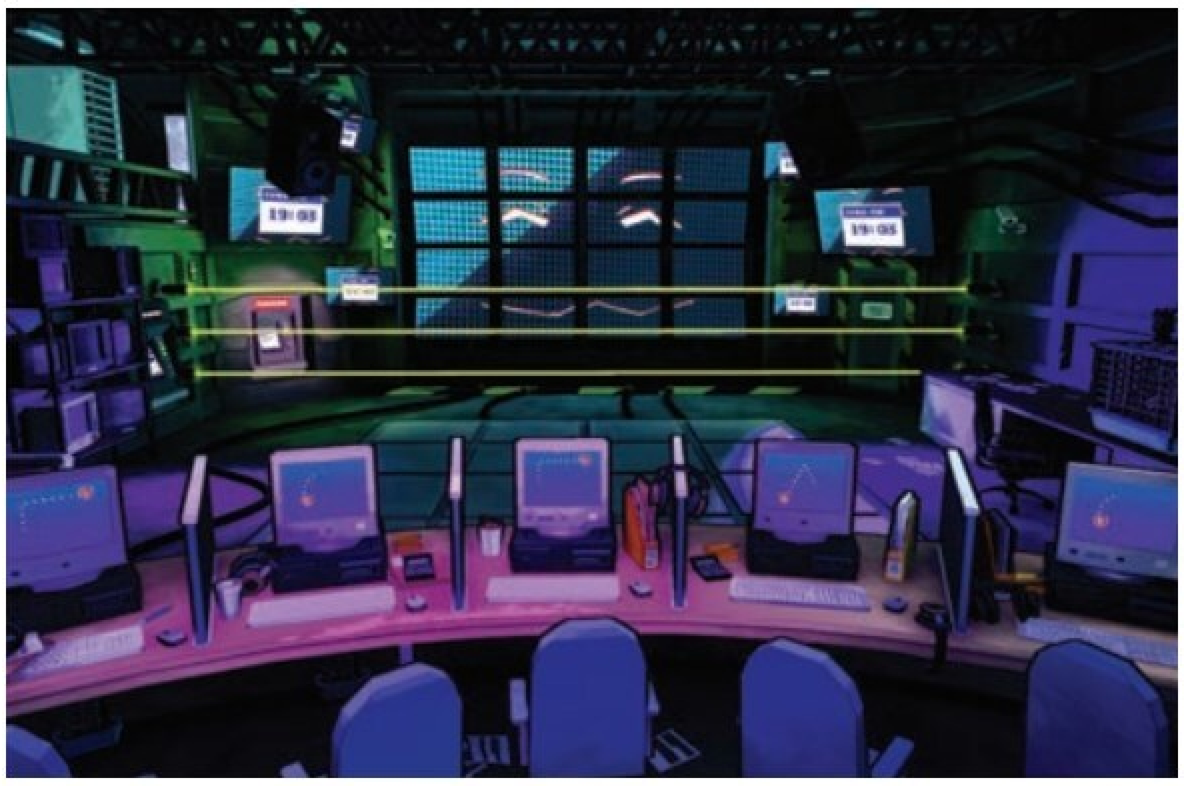
We also learned Street Fighter 6 features in-game commentary, supplied by familiar commentators from the fighting game community. While that is sure to inject a bit of a "sports game" feeling into play, it should also have the side effect of narrating and explaining onscreen action to players, helping to increase anyone's understanding of the often fast-moving combat.

Taken together, it's clear Capcom has two foundational goals in mind for Street Fighter 6. The first: continue appealing to its long-standing community with an extensive selection of modes and new gameplay options. At the same time, many features offer a welcoming on-ramp to new or lapsed players eager to experience modern Street Fighter for themselves. And that kind of evangelizing is good for everyone interested in seeing the fighting game community grow and prosper.

BY MATT MILLER

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom
RELEASE 2023

ESCAPE ACADEMY



As a fledgling escape artist, you enroll in an eccentric university designed to help you master the art of solving escape rooms. Over a dozen separate escape rooms await your big brain, but you can enlist the help of a friend in split-screen co-op. Solve rooms, earn badges, unravel a mysterious plot, and graduate at the top of your class this June. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Puzzle
PUBLISHER iam8bit, Skybound Games **DEVELOPER** Coin Crew Games
RELEASE June 28

DO NOT BUY THIS GAME

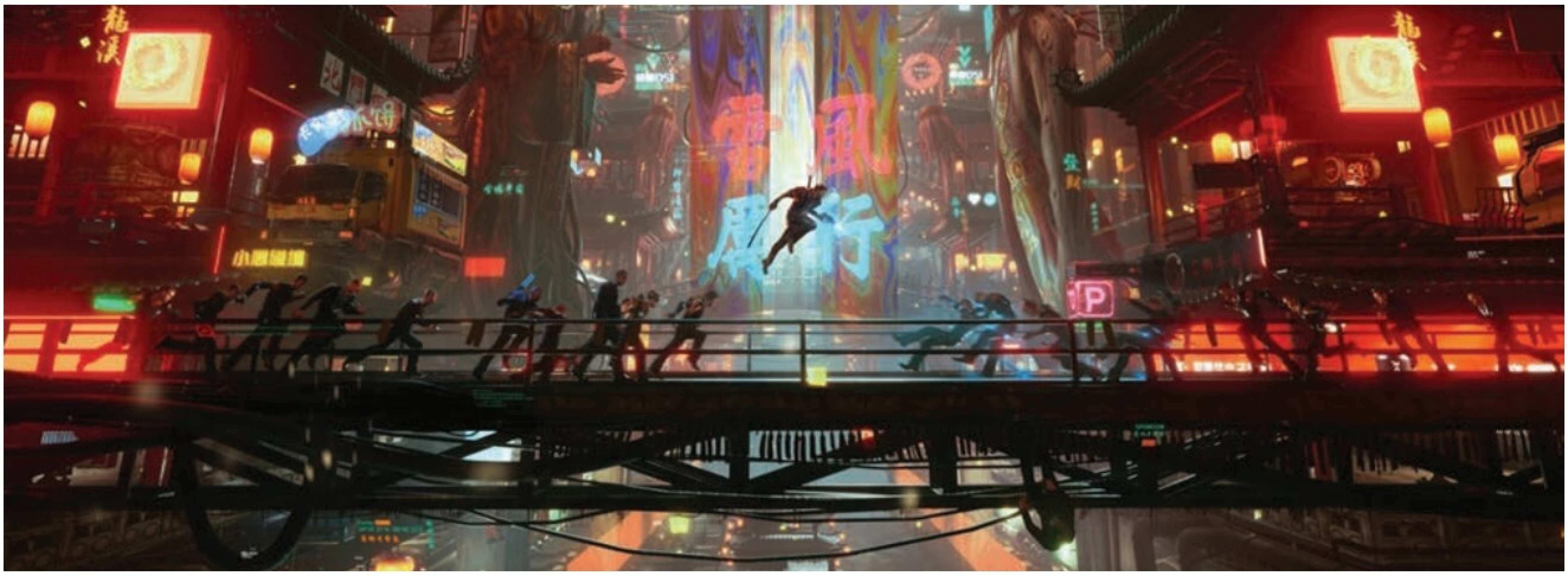
Do Not Buy This Game is a game about making video games. Specifically, it's a game being "made" as you play it. A demo is available now for the debut title by the one-person team at Kingblade Games. But predictably considering the name, its Steam page urges you to, well, not play, listing such features as "a whole lot of nothing" and "more nothing." **BY BLAKE HESTER**

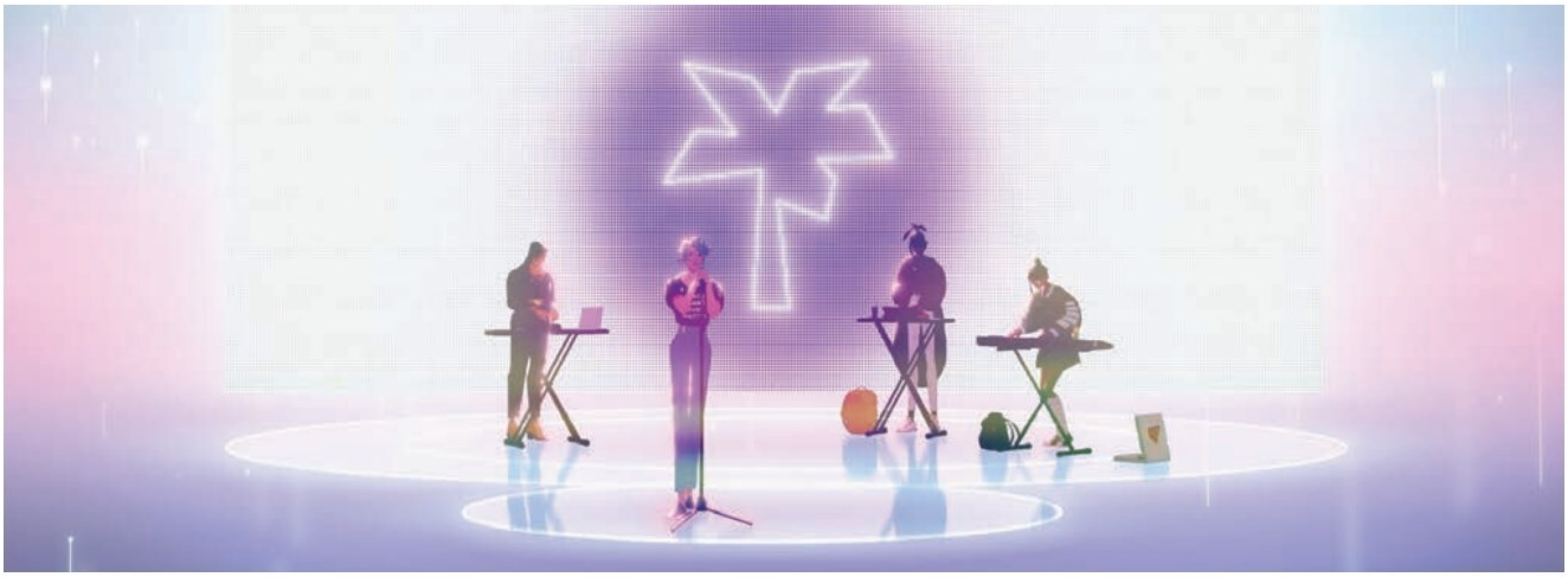
PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Kingblade Games
DEVELOPER Kingblade Games **RELEASE** TBA

LOOPMANCER

This cyberpunk 2D action roguelite stars a detective fighting to protect his city while trapped in a mysterious time loop. Upon death, he's resurrected at the start of the day and must use the knowledge accumulated from each run to get to the bottom of it all. The adventure blends stylish melee combat with firearms as well as fast-paced platforming. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** eBrain Studios
DEVELOPER eBrain Studios **RELEASE** July 13





WE ARE OFK

Described as a “music biopic,” We Are OFK is a narrative adventure where you play Itsume Saito, who struggles to make it in LA’s music scene while managing a full-time job, a brutal commute, and more. However, one chance encounter with a rising Hollywood producer could change everything, and that story will play out over five weekly episodes. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Team OFK **DEVELOPER** Team OFK **RELEASE** Summer

THE GARDEN PATH

Augustus
It's the duty of a ranger to keep peace in the natural world.

The Garden Path is about the quiet moments in life. The hand-illustrated, life simulation game provides a landscape just waiting for love and care. Your job is to create a garden and shape it however you please. The garden changes over time, as do the quirky characters you encounter, creating meaning in this tranquil place. **BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** carrotcake
DEVELOPER carrotcake **RELEASE** 2022

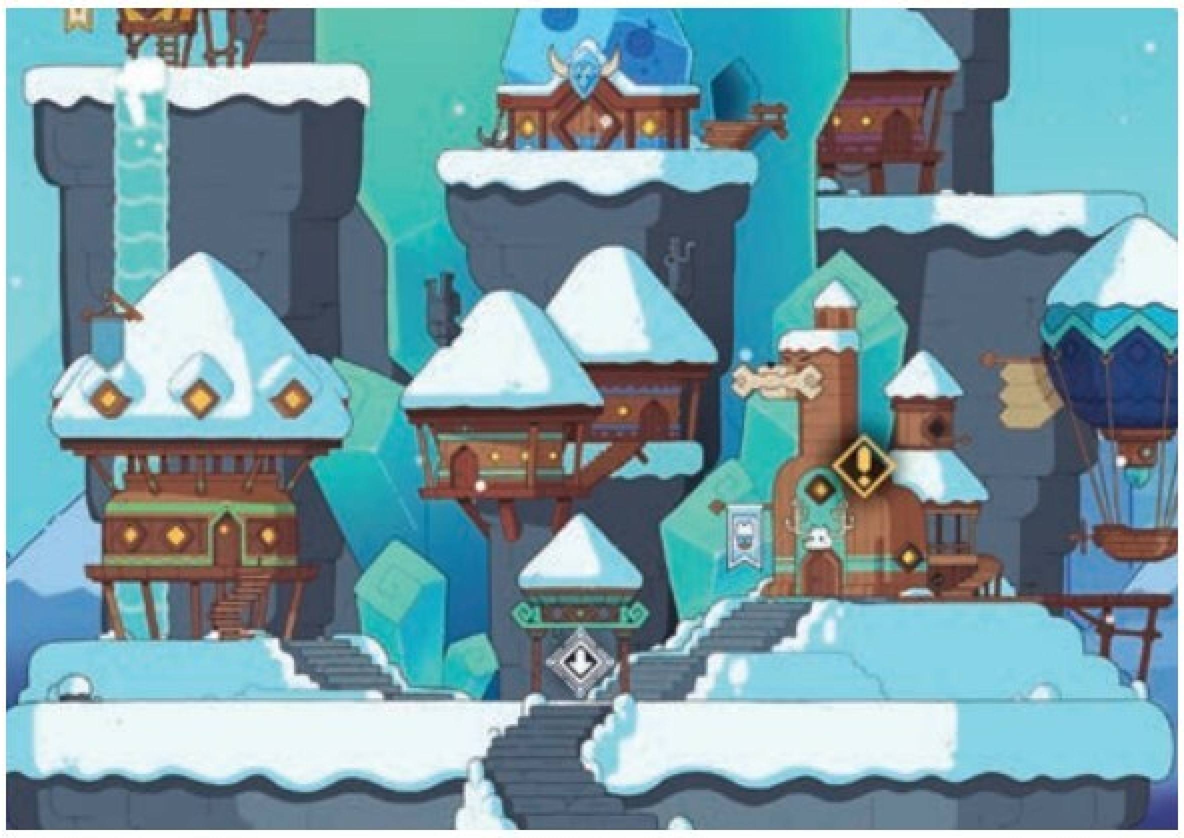
WAYWARD STRAND

Hop aboard an Australian airborne hospital with teenage journalist Casey Beaumaris in Wayward Strand. Launching this summer, the narrative adventure boasts compelling, hand-drawn visuals. The pleasing aesthetic helps set the tone as you wander around the deck, admiring the flying vessel’s cloud-laden visuals and learning all you can about the residents. **BY JILL GRODT**

She must have been famous!

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Ghost Pattern **DEVELOPER** Ghost Pattern
RELEASE July 21

WILDFROST

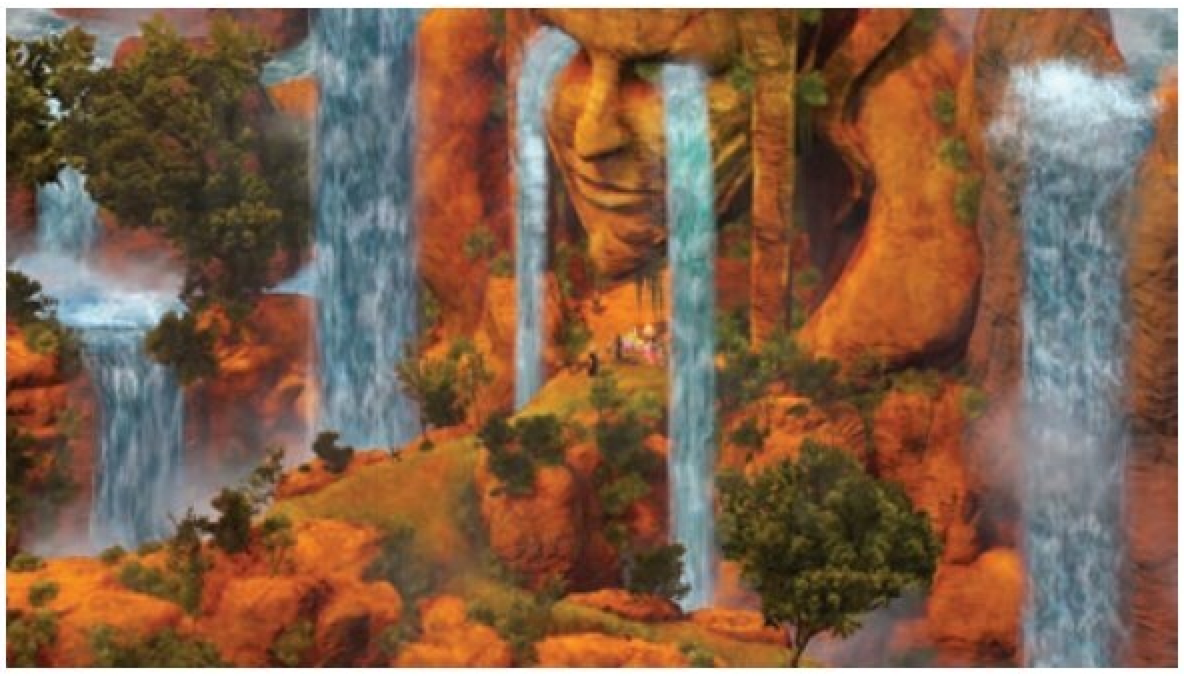


Wildfrost is a tactical roguelike deckbuilder that tasks players with surviving through a time when the sun has frozen over. You must build a deck of card companions and items to battle your way to the Sun Temple while also constructing the town of Snowdwell, which acts as your hub for upgrades, new cards, and more. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy **PUBLISHER** Chucklefish
DEVELOPER Deadpan Games, Gaziter **RELEASE** Winter

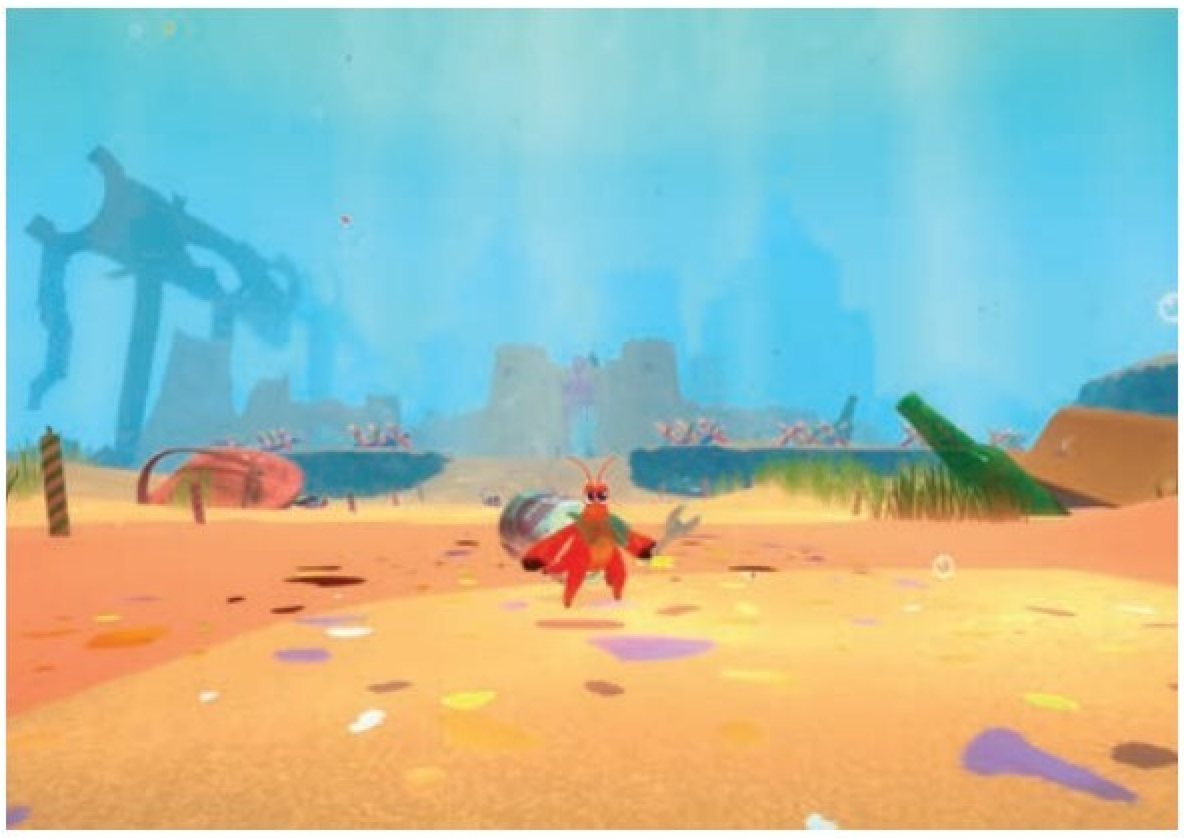
ALALOTH: CHAMPIONS OF THE FOUR KINGDOMS

The classic isometric CRPG genre is gaining a new entrant, albeit with a new twist on combat. Alaloth injects timing and positioning-based Souls-like combat into an attractive and richly imagined fantasy world. Early glimpses struck me with the variety of biomes and the overall size of the explorable space. It's a wildly ambitious approach to the long-established gameplay style, with a launch set for later this summer. **BY MATT MILLER**



PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (3-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Gamera Interactive **DEVELOPER** Gamera Interactive **RELEASE** June 30

ANOTHER CRAB'S TREASURE

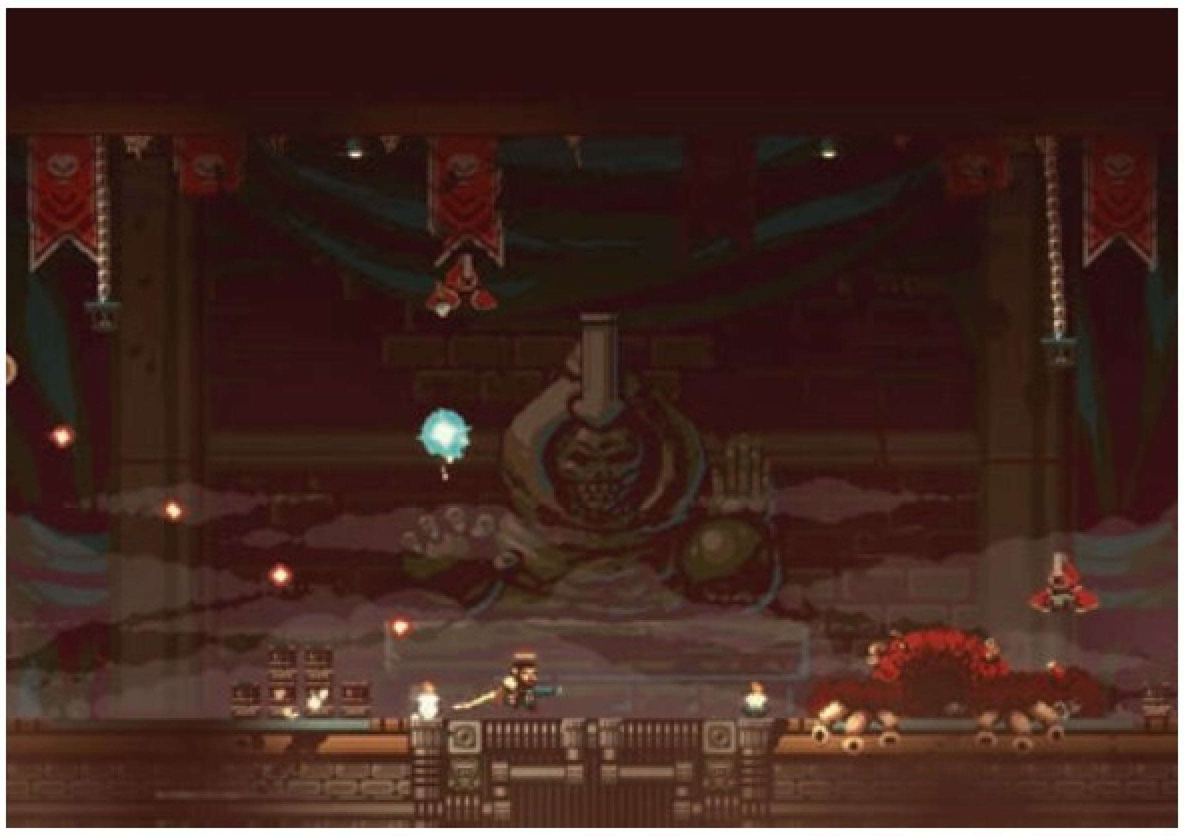


Aggro Crab, known for Going Under, revealed its second game during May's Indie World showcase. The Souls-like stars a "naked little" hermit crab on a mission to reclaim his repossessed shell. The studio's first title used a bizarre premise to examine real-life ills, so it wouldn't be surprising to find a meaty narrative under the game's crustaceous exterior. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Aggro Crab
DEVELOPER Aggro Crab **RELEASE** 2023

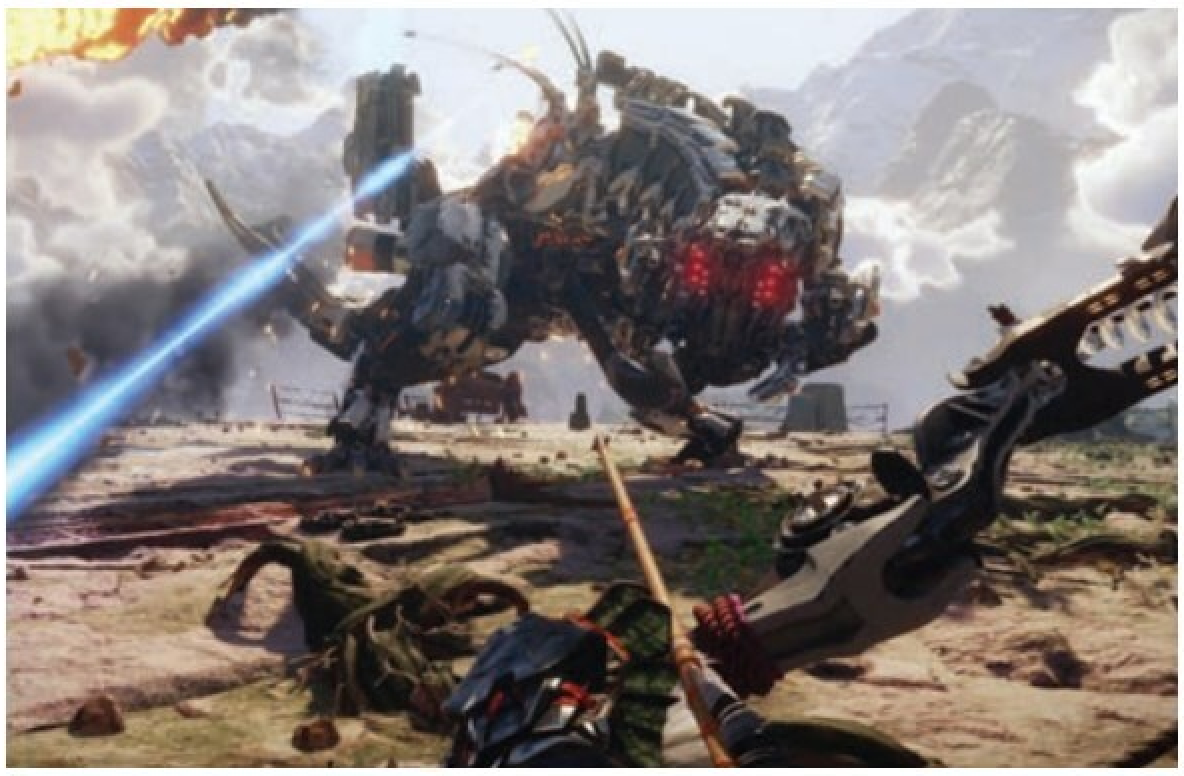
GUNBRELLA

In the aptly named Gunbrella, players control a logger with an umbrella that also turns into a gun (or maybe vice versa?). The side-scrolling combat and platforming are fast-paced, with wild bullet sprays flying everywhere, even as you fling out the umbrella to block attacks, boost into the air, or glide along zip lines. **BY MATT MILLER**



PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Doinksoft **RELEASE** 2023

HORIZON CALL OF THE MOUNTAIN

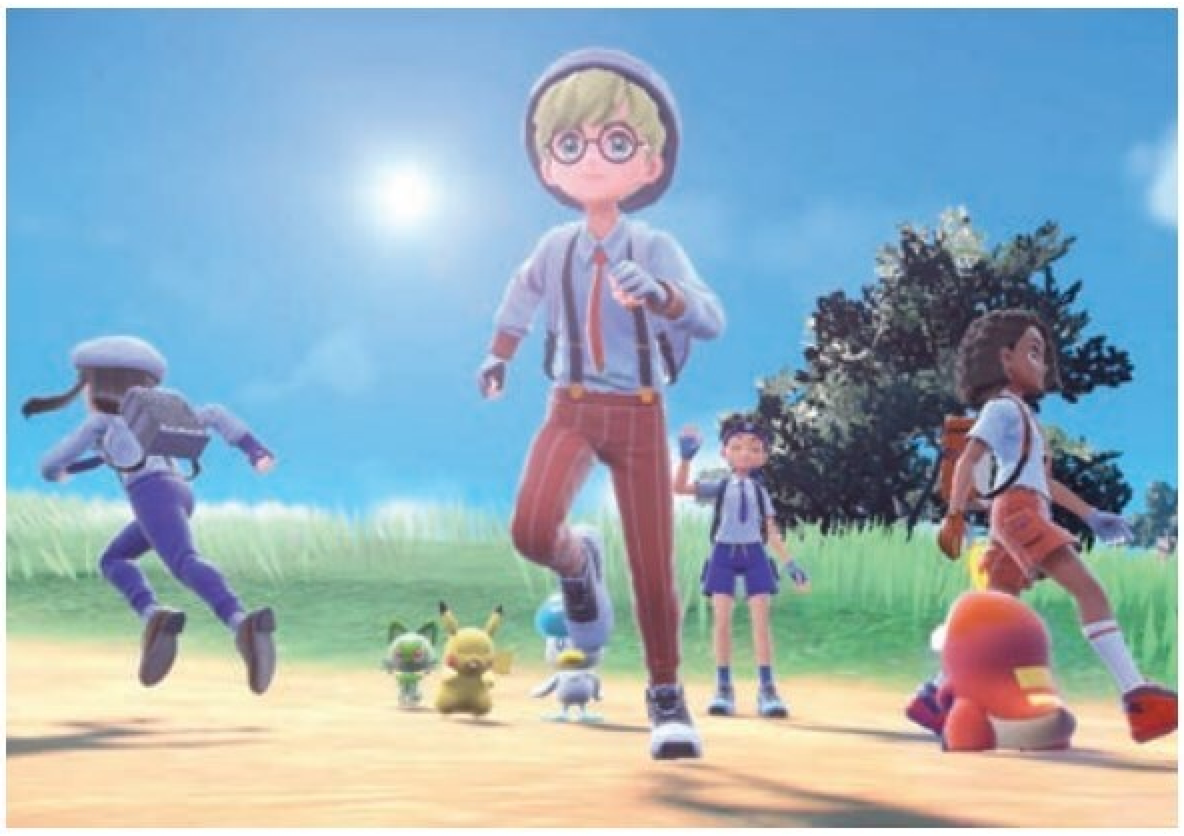


June's State of Play showed off the next-gen VR adventure Horizon Call of the Mountain. You play Ryas, once an imprisoned Shadow Carja but now charged with saving Meridian. The trailer revealed lush environments and impressive first-person shots of monstrous machines. Alongside the main story, players can look forward to a unique tour of the world in River Ride. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM PSVR2 **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Sony Interactive Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Guerrilla Games, Firesprite **RELEASE** TBA

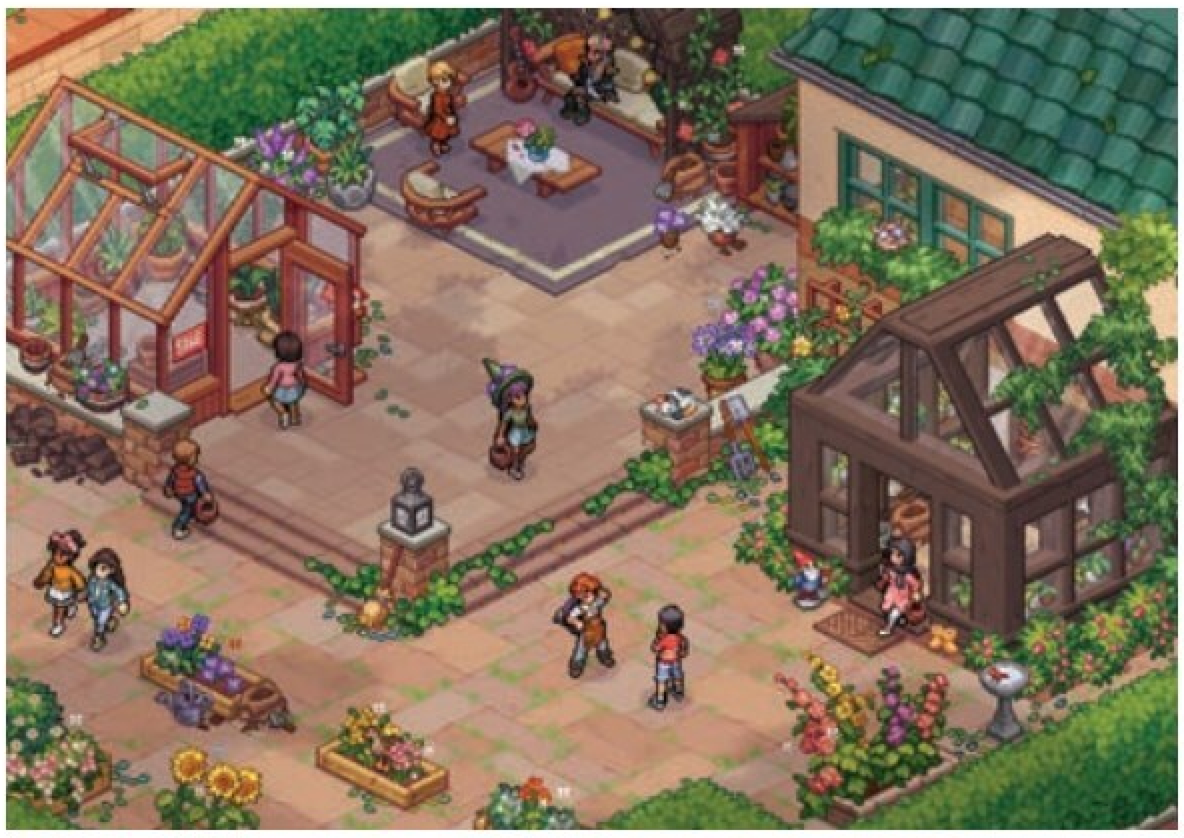
POKÉMON SCARLET AND VIOLET

Pokémon Scarlet and Violet finally got a second trailer and release date. Depending on which version you play, you help Professor Sada or Professor Turo. Not only that, but you aren't adventuring alone. In addition to NPC Nemona guiding you, Game Freak also revealed you can explore the region with friends in new four-player online gameplay. **BY BRIAN SHEA**



PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Game Freak **RELEASE** November 18

WITCHBROOK



You are a witch in training in the charming town of Mossport, balancing your magical education at the local college with friendship, romance, and personal interests like photography, gardening, or shopping. Witchbrook has remained quiet for much of its lengthy development cycle but make no mistake – this pixel art playground has tremendous potential. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** Chucklefish **DEVELOPER** Chucklefish **RELEASE** TBA

RESIDENT EVIL 4 REMAKE

The Resident Evil 4 remake is official. We got new looks at protagonists Leon Kennedy and Ashley Graham during the reveal, and glimpses of antagonists Osmund Saddler and Bitores Mendez, among others. The trailer also showed Salazar Castle and the iconic village. RE4 remake is coming to consoles and PC on March 24, 2023. VR content is also planned for PlayStation VR2. **BY BLAKE HESTER** ■

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom **RELEASE** March 24

Reviews

spotlight

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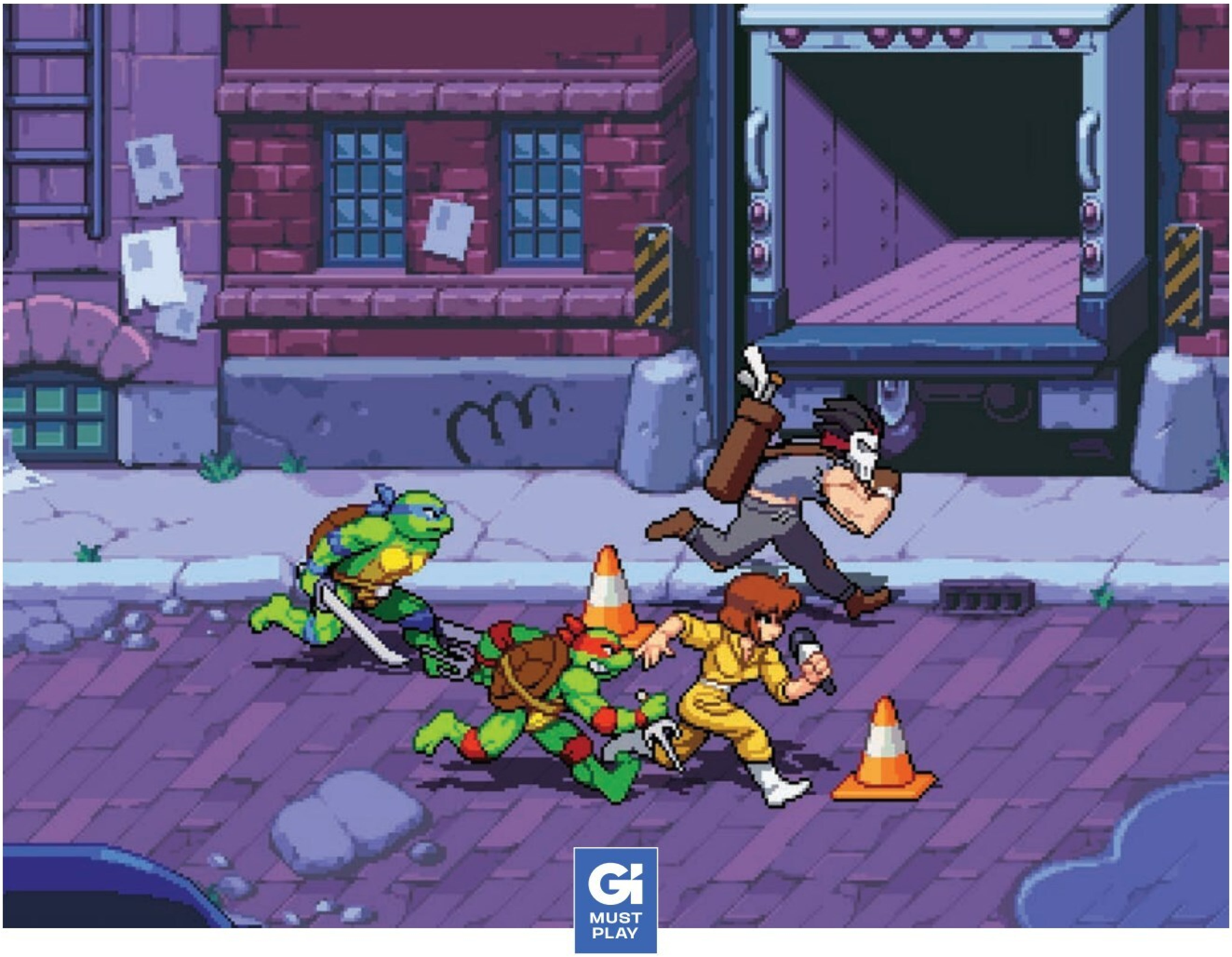
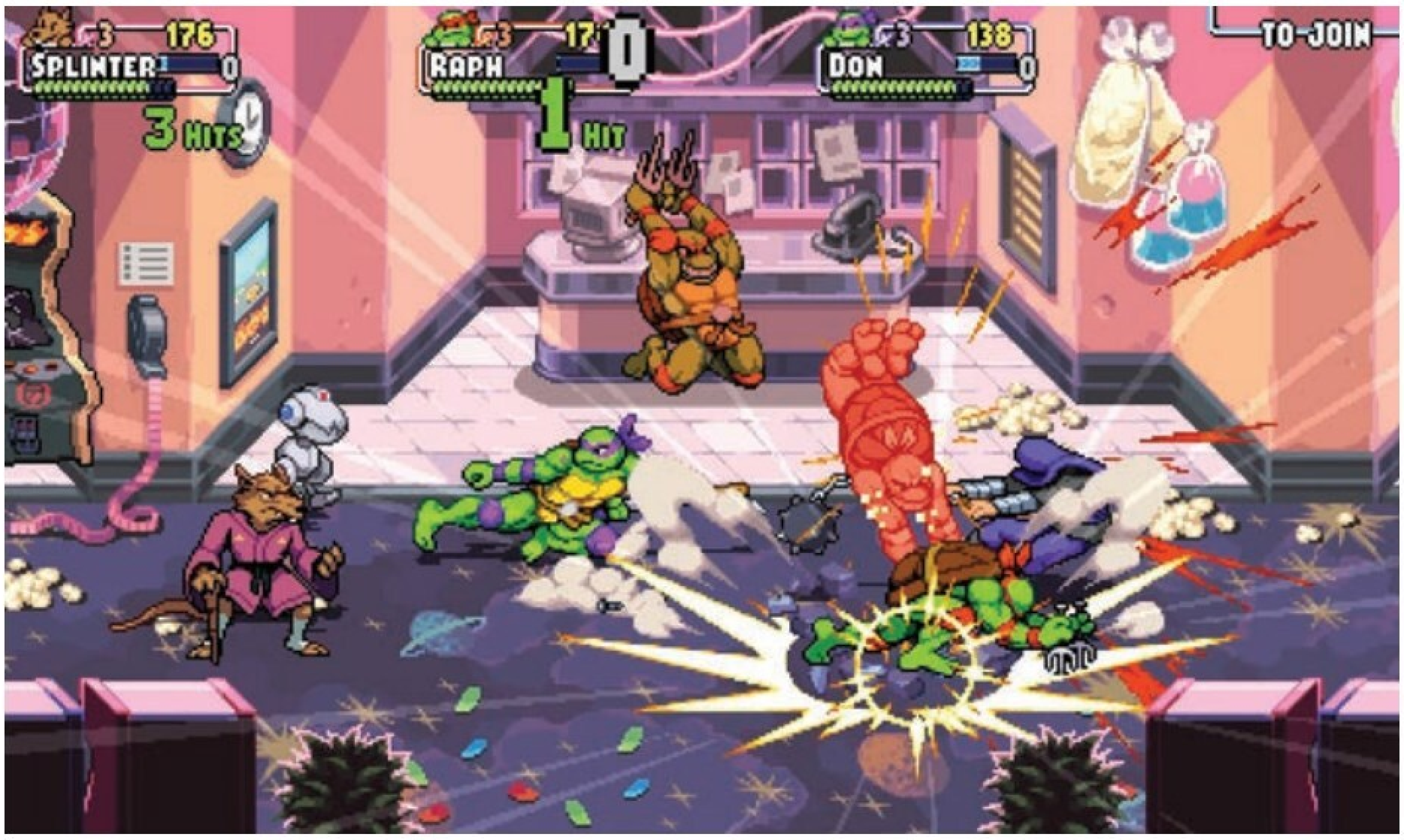
For more information on our scoring system, visit GameInformer.com/Scoring
To read all of our reviews, visit GameInformer.com/Reviews



GI MUST PLAY

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE

Old-school thrills, new-school polish



Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles carved a perfect niche in video games by way of the cooperative beat 'em up. Titles like the 1989 arcade game and Turtles in Time let fans fulfill the fantasy of kicking shell alongside their friends, but it's been a long time since our green heroes were the stars of a great video game. Shredder's Revenge ends that drought, serving as a lovingly-crafted homage to TMNT's glory days, giving fans what they remember while sanding down most of the rough edges.

Shredder and his Foot Clan run amok in New York City, and it's up to the Turtles – alongside Master Splinter, April O'Neil, and an unlockable Casey Jones – to stop them. Up to six players team up to brawl their way through over a dozen colorful, detailed stages in an adventure inspired by the classic 1987 cartoon. Although Shredder's Revenge can appeal to anyone, those who grew up in the '80s and early '90s will best appreciate the reverence for that series oozing from every pixelated brick. I couldn't stop smiling as I recognized Easter eggs and encountered a fearsome foe or friendly face I'd long forgotten about. Hearing the original voice cast bring the Turtles to life adds a nostalgic cherry atop the package, and a wonderful retro-inspired soundtrack ranks among the year's best.

Shredder's Revenge doesn't try to reinvent the beat 'em up. Rather, it refines the old-school template. You still mash the same attack button to execute simple combos, but chaining together aerial, running, and various special attacks provides enough depth to keep it from feeling completely one-note. I especially loved using the dodge/recovery button to sidestep attacks, bypass defenses, or instantly get back in the fray when knocked down. However, battling flying enemies can be a pain due to how easy they are to miss.

Even with a full squad of six players and mobs of enemies on screen, Shredder's Revenge runs like a dream. Any semblance of strategy goes out the window with a half-dozen friends swinging ninja weapons at once, but that provides its own chaotic brand of entertainment. Sure, losing track of yourself in the sea of digital humanity happens often and can be mildly frustrating, but the joy of laughing and cheering alongside so many buddies dulls that irritation.

Each character sports individual traits, such as reach, attack, and speed, that differentiate them enough without making one feel better than the other. You can't go wrong even if someone claims your favorite. Though I'll always rep Donatello, I had a great time using everyone.

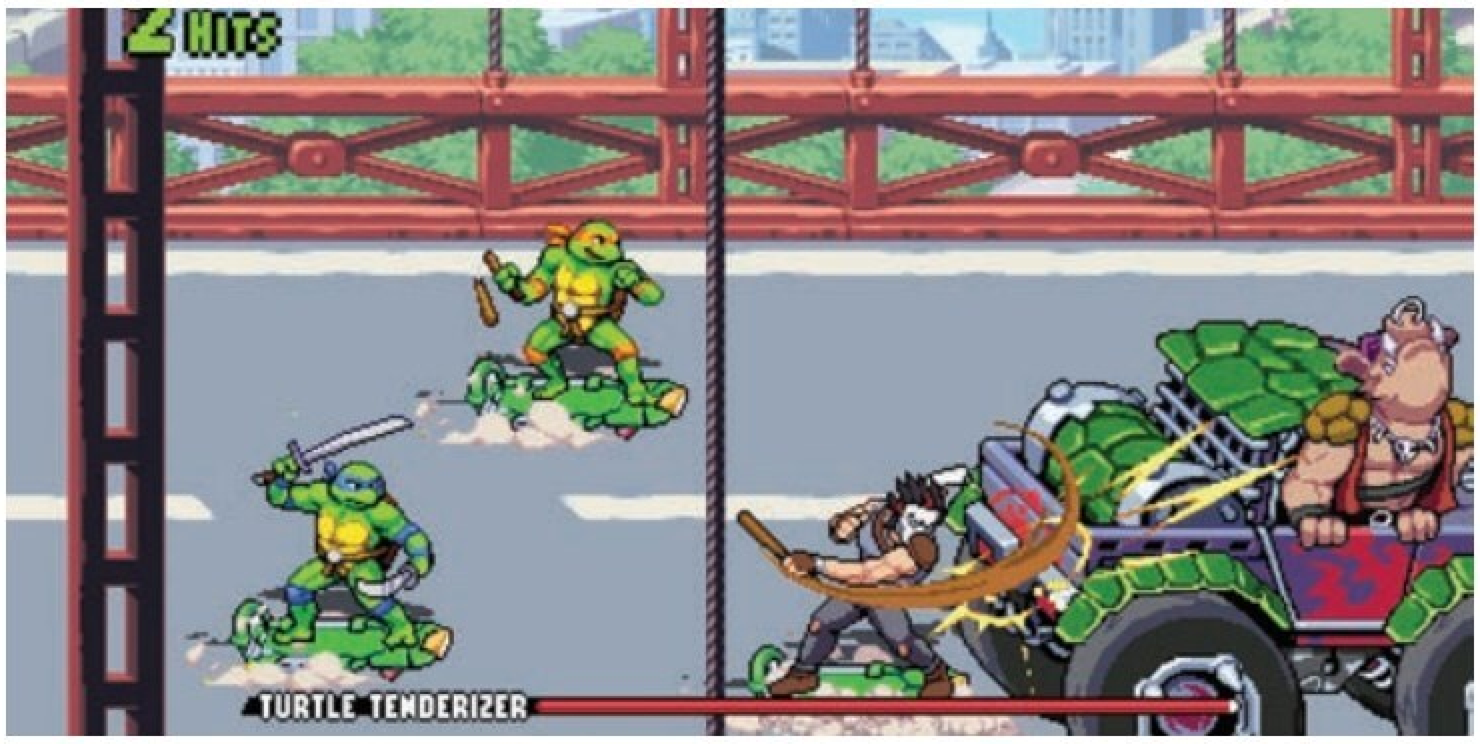
In addition to a standard Arcade mode, a Story mode offers an objective-based variant. Instead of tackling stages one after another, players travel between them on a world map. Levels have simple objectives such as avoiding damage throughout the mission or executing a specific attack a number of times. Completing quests rewards points that level up characters, unlocking new abilities (which are available by default in Arcade), or adding more health points and other stat buffs. I appreciate how Story mode's objectives incentivized me to observe stages for collectibles or traps to use against enemies. It may not be a colossal shake-up, but it's a neat twist worth playing if you already conquered Arcade.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge gave me what I wanted: a polished, raucously fun throwback that plays better than how I remember the original games. Turtles fans, new and old, will find plenty to love, but those nostalgic for this era of the franchise are in for the biggest treat. Invite some friends, order a pizza, and prepare to relive your childhood in the best possible way.

BY MARCUS STEWART

8.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 6 Player Action (6-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Dotemu
DEVELOPER Tribute Games **RELEASE** June 16 **RATING** E10+



SPLINTER
151
PRESS
EXIT
CADE

MARIO STRIKERS: BATTLE LEAGUE

Just off the post

Many consider soccer the world's most beautiful game. There's an elegance to the way players pass, score, and celebrate while on the pitch. Mario Strikers: Battle League may share DNA with its real-world inspiration, but it focuses more on brutality than beauty.

The setup for Battle League is simple: Players assemble teams of four controllable characters and an A.I. goalie to duke it out. At times, the title feels more like a fighting game than fútbol. There are no rules; pulverize the enemy whenever you can. Kick them into electric fences. Disrupt them with items. Utilize whatever brutal tactics you see fit. As a competitive person, I loved using these vicious moves to come out on top.

While the game doesn't shy away from brutality, it also rewards those using these mechanics with tact; every move on the pitch has consequences. Tackling is a powerful way to secure the ball but also results in opponents getting a chance to nab an item. If the opposing player dodges your tackle at the right time, they get a speed boost and increase their chance of scoring.

Nothing epitomizes that dance better than Hyper Strikes. These two-point shots can blast past your opponent's goalie with precise timing. Mess up the sequence, though, and goalies can block your shot and open you up to enemy breakaways. While these annoyingly unskippable scenes occasionally interrupt match flow, they are exhilarating, leading to elation or crushing defeat in the blink of an eye.

Building out a balanced team is essential to not ending up on the losing side of a match, as each character has specific areas where they excel and can counter the enemy. To bring out the best in your team, you'll need to utilize gear. Coins earned from matches can be spent on equipment, affecting how each character controls. These boosts come at a cost as each buff to one category brings down another. At first, I largely ignored the system, but the steeper the challenge got, the happier I was having boosted abilities as I delved further into Battle League's different modes.

Those modes are where Mario Strikers loses a bit of its luster – save for one exception. The single-player experience comes from Quick Battle solo sessions and Cup Battles. The former is your standard match, whereas the latter is a tournament where players vie for trophies and larger sums of coins. Cup Battles are more enjoyable than the standard Quick Battle, but outside of slight difficulty scaling and teams being tailored around a specific attribute, the modes don't feel that different. I found they were helping me learn the game more than posing a considerable challenge.

The real highlight is Strikers Club, which lets you form a soccer league with other players. As a club owner, you can name your own league, create jerseys, and even design the field. Some of these customization options only unlock by spending tokens earned from matches in Strikers Club, which comes as a small disappointment for single-player fans. Still, I relished the heightened sense of competition and companionship I felt playing online, though the inconsistent A.I. proved to throw off my enjoyment.

At times, my goalie blocks everything near them. Other times, they'd let an incredibly weak shot waltz by. The same can be said of A.I. teammates, who generally did a good job getting into position to score and defend, but then let a ball bounce off them, allowing the other team to score with ease. Nothing was more frustrating than when I was playing well, and then computer Luigi cost me a game.

Mario Strikers: Battle League may not be the ultimate version of soccer, but its strategic matches, fun online modes, and energetic animations make for an enjoyable time. While the single-player crowd may find the game a bit lacking, Nintendo's return to the pitch is bound to create the same triumphant highs, and friendship-ending lows the company's suite of party titles is known for.

BY ALEX STADNIK

7.5

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 8-Player Sports (8-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo **RELEASE** June 10 **RATING** E10+

THE QUARRY

Screaming until dawn

Supermassive Games' Until Dawn was an exceptional horror horror game with deep narrative choice, allowing the player to determine which teenagers survived a night of hell. The developer's follow-up, The Dark Pictures Anthology, delivered plenty of scares to run from, but scaled down the number of choices and was a huge step back. The studio's latest game, The Quarry, again places decision-making in the spotlight. This design pays off handsomely in a game loaded with shocking twists and turns, and a spiderweb of paths leading to 186 potential endings. Even though The Quarry is technically a spiritual successor to Until Dawn, this is the sequel we've been dying to play.

The setting is a love letter to horror cinema. The final day of summer camp at Hackett's Quarry is supposed to be about tearful goodbyes between friends and flings, but a broken-down van gives the teenage counselors one more day to party together without worrying about the kids. Supermassive uses this booze-filled bonfire moment to establish relationships, taking the time to get to know each counselor while giving the player the chance to define how they act through meaningful input.

Conversations between two characters are frequently interrupted to give the player two lines of thinking – such as "assertive" or "apologetic." This destermines what happens next. Relationships are strengthened or weakened depending on the response, and they could lead to dramatic tonal shifts that create alternative narrative paths. Environment exploration and a few brief shooting sequences also bring different outcomes and are enjoyable in their own right.

Supermassive does an excellent job telling you when you've moved the story in another direction, but some decisions are too vague and lead to devastating results. Halfway through the game, I was faced with a choice to open a trap door or grab a bag – both giving little context of what might happen. One of those decisions led to a character becoming a midnight snack.

Quick-time events deliver potential fail points in action sequences but are telegraphed far too long and are a sinch to complete. They are shockingly ineffective and slow the frantic sequences down at critical moments. There isn't much action out of these button presses, an element of play that is subtly scaled back compared to Until Dawn.

Supermassive has made The Quarry more of a cinematic experience than an interactive one. The lack of control is a little disappointing but keeping the teenagers alive mainly through decisions – of which there is a slew of them – was more than enough to keep me going.

I won't spoil who or what is after the teenagers, but the survival aspect is thrilling, and figuring out what is truly happening is one of the game's better hooks. The best part, however, is the counselors. Their relationships and ambitions are at the heart of most choices and often conflict with those of other characters. I would often sit and think about how a specific decision may affect someone else at camp.

The story moves at a decent clip and goes to exciting places, yet it can be a headscratcher in logic and clarity. You'll want to scream at the characters on screen for not doing obvious things, but I suppose that's a teenage slasher-flick staple and may be by design. You just have to turn off your brain and let the little details go.

Supermassive has always assembled great casts, including Academy Award winner Rami Malek in Until Dawn, and that again rings true in The Quarry. The biggest names on the bill are David Arquette and Ted Raimi, but the younger ensemble steals the show. Evan Evagora, Siobhan Williams, Ariel Winter, Justice Smith, and Halston Sage nail their performances, making you want to do everything you can to keep them out of harm's way.

Their banter is quite good, and their relationships develop to the point that you can think for the characters and help them grow. Supermassive's art team also deserves props for bringing their likenesses to life with a frightening degree of realism, capturing little emotions that hold a character's true intent for a split second. The darkly lit and nicely designed environments also help to up the tension and give the game a truly cinematic feel.

For the core game, I wish more of the action was in the hands of the player, but I can't deny how enthralling the choices are, especially when they lead to absolute chaos. Once the frantic running through the woods begins, the dark mysteries and thrill of keeping people alive are powerful hooks that will keep you glued in suspense until the credits roll.

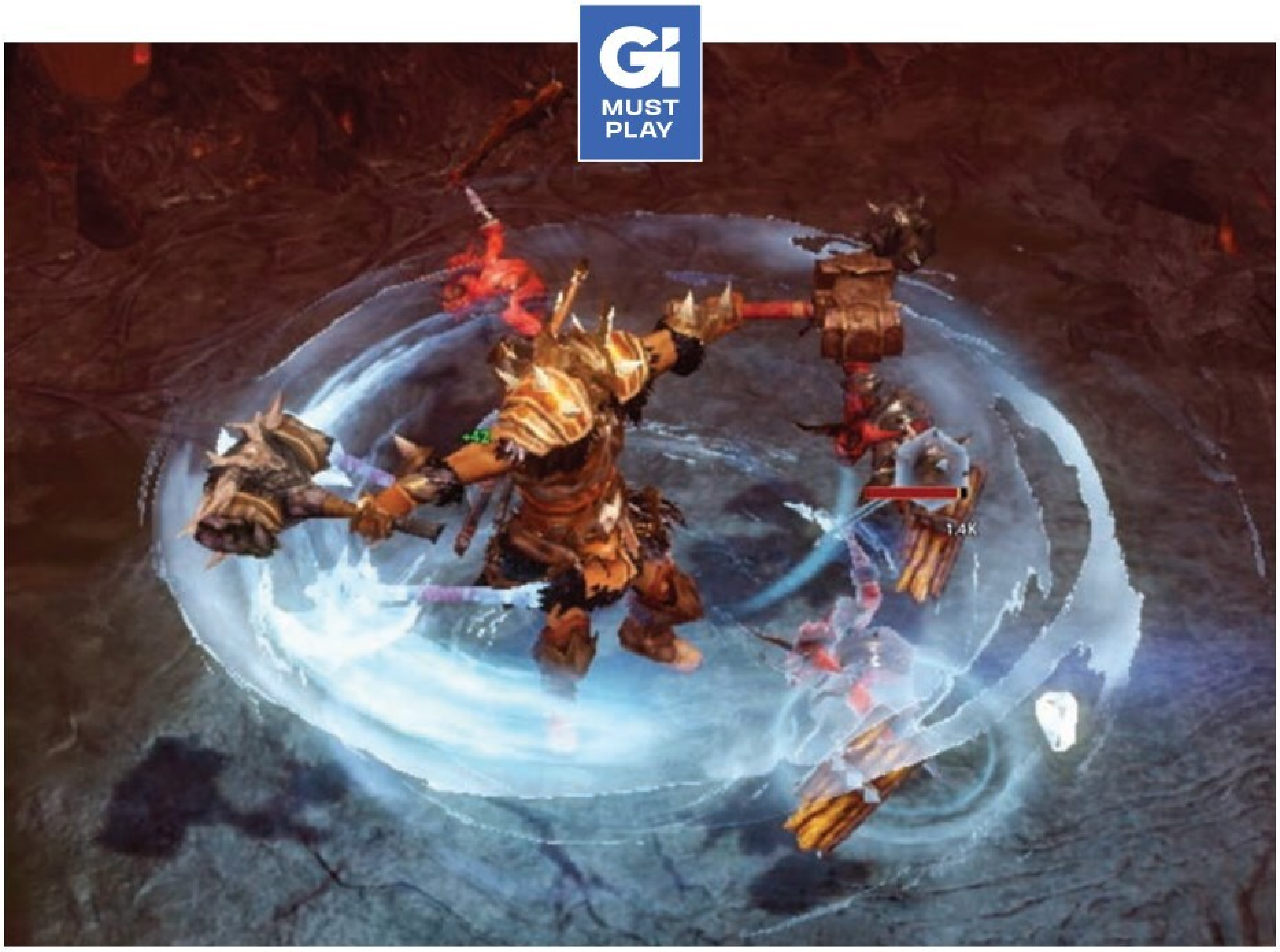
BY ANDREW REINER

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** 2K Games
DEVELOPER Supermassive Games **RELEASE** June 10 **RATING** M

DIABLO IMMORTAL

The price of playing with the devil



My fingers ache for hours after playing Diablo Immortal; my hands haven't spent this much time curled around my phone this way in years. Despite the pain my aging hands suffered in my first few days with Immortal, it was worth it for the fun I had. The series' core action/RPG smash and loot gameplay makes the transition wonderfully to mobile thanks to responsive controls designed for portable play and adherence to the sights and sounds of the franchise. With this mobile facelift comes a free-to-play model most can avoid spending money on, but some specific parts of its monetization model blemish this game. This is disappointing, as it's otherwise a strong experience.

Immortal feels like a modern Diablo game thematically and aesthetically, and it often reminds me of a great mobile version of Diablo 3. Choosing between the six available classes – Barbarian, Wizard, Demon Hunter, Necromancer, Crusader, or Monk – you soon search for the shards of the shattered Worldstone, a vital relic from previous games. Despite Immortal taking place in the 20 years between the events of Diablo 2 and Diablo 3, the narrative is surprisingly ripe with gripping lore. A demon named Skarn aims to fill the power vacuum left after Diablo and Baal have been slain, causing more chaos for the never-peaceful plane of Sanctuary. Classic characters like Deckard Caine are back, while new faces such as Jin and Rayek expand the established Diablo narrative in ways I appreciate.

Playing Diablo Immortal is a treat; the intuitive and responsive touch controls are some of the best I've used in a mobile game, save for some minor hiccups. Skills can be performed by touching in the vicinity of a virtual button and aiming with the swipe of your thumb. It feels great to launch a fireball or dash your character into a demonic horde this way. Still, there is room for improvement in hit detection for some ranged attacks that miss when they look to be on target, causing some frustrating moments in the heat of battle.

Adventuring around the zones of Sanctuary reveal other players duking it out with monsters, accentuating that Immortal is an MMO by nature. While this design choice sacrifices the world map's traditional random generation, I grew fond of how alive each zone feels with real people populating the area. Immortal supports plenty of ways of grouping up with others, including eight-player Warbands for tight-knit groups who play together often alongside larger 100-player Clans that can show their allegiance to the PvP factions known as the Immortals and Shadows. I love getting a group together to run a bespoke four-player dungeon or even team up with someone on the fly to clear out the area's bounties and knock off a few quests on the Battle Pass.

As a free-to-play game, Diablo Immortal has a handful of monetization options. In my experience, you can play just about every aspect of the game without paying a dime, and I appreciate that's the case. A premium battle pass (paired with a free reward track) and cosmetics for sale in the shop are among the less intrusive expenditures and are implemented in a way that doesn't feel exploitative. What is concerning, however, is certain items are extremely limited for free-to-play players but available for a real-money fee. These crests provide legendary gems with variable star ranks and stats that benefit endgame progression greatly. Not only is this special crest extremely hard to get for the non-paying players, but the odds of a high-quality gem dropping even when you're spending plenty of cash makes this part of the free-to-play system disgusting. Considering how I'm delighted with most other aspects of Diablo Immortal, the monetization systems currently in place are deeply disappointing and truly sully what is otherwise a great experience.

I was looking for a substantial Diablo experience to play on my phone with Immortal, and it often reaches that bar. While I don't see myself going deep into the endgame unless the issues with legendary gems are resolved, I plan to still spend hours in Diablo Immortal, leveling a character in every class and playing until my hands ache. **BY JOHN CARSON**

8.5

PLATFORM PC • iOS • Android
STYLE Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Blizzard Entertainment
DEVELOPER Blizzard Entertainment, NetEase **RELEASE** June 2 **RATING** M

CITIZEN SLEEPER

Its hopeful and inspiring message is backed by a branching, heartfelt narrative and a great gameplay loop, making it difficult to put down. Add an enriching visual style and my favorite musical score of 2022 so far, and Citizen Sleeper is a game I'll be thinking about for years to come. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

9

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Fellow Traveler **DEVELOPER** Jump Over The Age **RELEASE** May 5 **RATING** T

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – SWANSONG

Swansong is this year's Forgotten City, a distinct narrative adventure that soars from the chances it takes. Player choice is front and center, and it's nice to see decisions turn into little games carrying significant narrative weight. **BY ANDREW REINER**

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Nacon **DEVELOPER** Big Bad Wolf **RELEASE** May 19 **RATING** M

EIYUDEN CHRONICLE: RISING

Pretty visuals can only get you so far, and Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising doesn't offer enough entertaining or unique content to keep it from being anything more than just a passable RPG. **BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

6.75

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** 505 Games **DEVELOPER** Natsume Atari **RELEASE** May 10 **RATING** E10+

SALT AND SACRIFICE

I enjoyed exploring the world, concepts of hunting and crafting, and the moody atmosphere, which kept me playing for dozens of hours. But its clunky progression systems and many maddening enemy encounters quickly make the fun times easy to forget. **BY JOHN CARSON**

7

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Ska Studios **DEVELOPER** Ska Studios **RELEASE** May 10 **RATING** T

EVIL DEAD: THE GAME

Developer Saber Interactive's commitment to fan service is commendable, and die-hard Evil Dead fans will find this release enjoyable. However, it's hard to see the lasting appeal for the rest of us. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN** ■

6

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (5-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Saber Interactive **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive, Boss Team Games **RELEASE** May 13 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC), TBA (Switch) **RATING** M

↘
Photography:
Alex Van Aken

In Search Of Perfect

Exploring caves with the creator of Spelunky

BY BLAKE HESTER

"HOW DO I TELL THE WORLD DEREK YU IS DEAD? And worse yet – it's my fault?"

Ridiculous, maybe, but these paranoid questions run through my head as Yu climbs a mountain. No safety gear. No helmet. Just his own hands, sneakers, and determination. I have to follow soon after, and though I'm undoubtedly scared, in the moment, I'm much more afraid of killing the creator of Spelunky than my own mortality. Though you could argue, in this hyper-specific example, the game should've been a cautionary tale. In Spelunky, you do die a lot. Nevertheless, I don't want to be responsible for the death of one of the game industry's most beloved indie developers.

It's late April, a hot mid-afternoon day in West Hills, Calif., a neighborhood about a 45-minute drive northwest of Los Angeles. It took about an hour to hike here: the Cave of Munits, which now looms roughly 25 feet above us, a giant fissure in the mountain we stand beneath. We knew we'd have to do some light climbing; the websites we'd read said as much. But now that I'm here, looking into the opening of Munits, I feel they sold it short. To my anxious mind, I'm about to climb El Capitan. It could be 25 feet or 3,000 feet, for all I know. Falling to your death feels the same no matter what altitude you slip from.

"Wow, this really is like some actual spelunking here," Yu says, the words stressed and labored as he pulls his body weight up.

I hear him panting. I've long since stopped watching – finding anything I can around me to look at instead; I don't want to see the consequences of my negligence. Halfway up, Yu stops to catch his breath. It's the second half of the climb where things go from bad to worse.

At the very least, it's pretty easy to find handholds in the first half. That all goes out the window as you climb the final bit into Munits. The rocks are slick, the gaps wide. You have to really stretch your legs to find leverage. It's not a 90-degree climb, but I'd wager it's pretty close. One wrong move, and that's all she wrote. I start to wonder if *Game Informer* video editor Alex Van Aken and I have the strength to carry Yu the mile back to civilization. There is, of course, no cell phone reception.

Now is probably a good time to tell you that Derek Yu did not die. Neither did I, for that matter, though I'm sure you assume as much. Once Yu makes it into Munits, I follow suit. The climb is hard and scary, and we consider turning back more than once.

But when I finally make it, I'm thankful we didn't. Before I look into the cave, I turn around to see the landscape I just traversed. We're high above some of the other hills in the Simi Valley mountain range. You can see for miles as they rise up and around the earth, the green grass stretching far and wide. If you avoid looking to the left at the nearest town, it feels like you're truly out in the wild. It's quiet. The kind that doesn't exist in cities. The kind you have to go out of your way to experience.

It is – for lack of a better word – perfect. The best view I can imagine after a near-worst case scenario.

Which feels appropriate. Because as far as many are concerned, Yu made a perfect game. About exploring a cave, no less.

Perfect

When Spelunky launched in 2012 – itself a remake of the 2008 freeware game of the same name, but this time financed and published by Microsoft for Xbox Live Arcade – it

Derek Yu, the creator of Spelunky

came at what was then, and may still be, the largest indie game movement. Hotline Miami, Fez, Journey, and of course, Spelunky, among others, all hit the same year. But even against stiff competition, Spelunky is a clear stand-out.

At its core, it's a game about exploring a cave. The catch: it's procedurally generated; no two playthroughs are the same. Further complicating matters, it's a roguelike and brutally difficult. It's a game you can – and must – play continuously to see everything there is to offer. As *Polygon* put it in their review back in 2012, "We may be playing Spelunky forever." It's hard to argue they're wrong. Spelunky quickly found an audience.

"I think when it came out, it was a new thing, that mixture of roguelike stuff and platforming," Yu says. "I mean, really, I feel like it's just the roguelike philosophy, but Spelunky really made it accessible to a lot of people."

By all estimations, Spelunky was very successful. He doesn't give exact numbers, but if you factor in the freeware version with the XBLA release, Yu says "millions" of people have played his game.

And a decade later, more so than many of its contemporaries, Spelunky is a game people still discuss. Of course, it helps that a sequel debuted in 2020, renewing interest. But part of that public consciousness comes from Yu himself. Over the last 10 years, he's been remarkably open about the game's development and given numerous in-depth talks. There's also an entire documentary by *Noclip* about the making-of the project. Hell, he even wrote a book, aptly titled *Spelunky*, published by Boss Fight Books in 2016, chronicling the development in meticulous detail. People love Spelunky, and they love hearing Yu talk about Spelunky. I guess that's what happens when you release a "perfect" game.

I want to interrogate that word – "perfect." It's loaded, inherently holding massive weight. And yet, more so than perhaps any other game, it's the word used to describe Spelunky. It's so synonymous that the back of Yu's book even references it. "But how is a 'perfect' game made?" it asks. Read the book to find out. I'm here to ask Yu something else. How does that term affect him as a creator? How does he deal with it and think about it?

SPELUNKY

DEVELOPER
Mossmouth, LLC

PUBLISHER
Mossmouth, LLC
Microsoft Studios (X360)

RELEASE
PC
December 21, 2008
August 8, 2013 (remake)
Xbox 360
July 4, 2012
PS3, PS Vita
August 27, 2013
PS4
October 7, 2014
Switch
August 26, 2021

"I think when I heard the word perfect, I didn't feel like the people who said it meant perfect-perfect, like, there was absolutely nothing that could possibly be improved or changed," Yu says, sitting atop a large rock inside Munits. "But I took it to mean that they felt like it got pretty close."

"When I heard it, I was obviously very flattered," he says. "But to me, it's also a dangerous word. I think in making art, making games, and just in my everyday life, I try to – there are some pigeons behind me in this cave."

The inside of Munits where we're talking is almost comically beautiful. Tall rocks stacked on top of each other make a natural staircase to ascend further into the cave. Holes in the ceiling allow sunbeams to funnel through – as if God herself was lighting our path. At the very back is a black hole we opt not to explore. The ceiling is high, the echo loud. It's like we're in our own private cathedral inside a mountain. We're lucky, and we have the place to ourselves for the hour we're here.

Except for these damn pigeons.

As Yu cuts himself off, behind us, deep from the back hole, we hear what I can only describe as the worst sound I've ever heard: the low echo of dozens, maybe hundreds of pigeons all cooing together. It's low, otherworldly, and terrifying.

"It sounds like the pigeons are using walkie-talkies or something," Yu says, laughing. "It's so weird."

I agree. It's unlike anything I've heard before, ostensibly because of the cave's shape warping the sound into something unnatural by the time it hits our ears. Occasionally, one of the pigeons flies out from the hole, directly over our heads and into nests and smaller crevices surrounding us.

It goes on like this. We talk for a bit; then pigeons interrupt us.

We look at each other to commiserate over how terrifying the sound is; then we carry on. To Yu, this conversation, and how it goes against the plan, gets at his feelings about making a perfect game.

"I guess that's a good segue to me saying that I think it's important to just kind of embrace imperfection and the chaos of life," Yu says after the pigeons settle down. "And I certainly didn't feel like Spelunky was a perfect game myself. I think it felt like the very best that we were able to do at the time. But I could certainly see – especially by the release of Spelunky on Xbox [360 in 2012] – that we learned so much that I definitely felt like I could do better. That we could all do better."

But that also meant learning to accept his flaws.

Imperfect

Finding the first mistake always feels the worst, Yu says.

But it's always there and will always be there. No matter what Yu creates, he always finds the first blemish that made it past his watchful eye as soon as it's done.

"Up until that first mistake, it does kind of feel like you did something perfect, and when there's one mistake, it kind of feels like this perfect thing with this one blemish on it," Yu says. "That feels really bad."

I think I get what he means, if only because this whole day isn't going how I'd imagined. For months I'd planned this piece out in my mind. It went something like this: we'd show up, and the sun would be in just the right position to cast the perfect amount of shadows across the landscape. Munits would be impeccable. We certainly wouldn't have to leave most of our filming equipment behind because it's too heavy to carry up – a victim of not knowing what the actual climb is like. Every time Yu opened his mouth, it would be perfectly quotable. No "likes," "ums," or half-finished thoughts and ideas. I'd go home, and the piece would fall out of my fingers. Easy.

And to be fair, some of this is happening. Derek is incredibly smart and insightful. Munits is beautiful. The sun isn't doing us a ton of favors, but at the very least, it's not raining or overcast. If you squint, everything I'd imagined is almost playing out how I wanted.

But then a pigeon flies over your head and interrupts a fantastic answer – the kind that's never replicated once forced. Or you notice all the bugs and bird poop on the ground beside you. Or while capturing aerial footage, Alex crashes his drone in Munits and has to climb back into the cave after it. Or the fact that I somehow forgot a water bottle. My perfect day for my perfect piece is now decidedly imperfect.

People have told Yu he made something perfect for a decade now. And yet, 10 minutes into talking to him, he lets us know how Spelunky is not perfect. But it's not that he's trying to diminish his accomplishments – quite the opposite. Finding the first blemish, as he says, is painful; it feels bad. But it's going to happen. And it won't be just one.

"Inevitably, I'll find something else that is a little awkward," Yu says. "And then something else. And then I'll think about a previous game or piece of art that I made. 'Oh yeah, there were problems with that, too.' And then you just realize that nothing is perfect, and you start to actually appreciate some of these quote-unquote flaws as actually the human touch. That's my personality coming through. At the time, I chose to do it this way, and that's what I was feeling. Or maybe there was some pressure on me, some time pressure, and I just had to do it that way at that time. It ends up just making the work, I think, feel more rich in the end. I really just try to embrace that."

Embrace and build, actually. For many people, Spelunky might be a "perfect" game, but for Yu, there was plenty to improve upon – which is why he created Spelunky 2. As he tells it, he didn't set out to reinvent the wheel; he wanted to build upon it. When he thinks about people's opinion of Spelunky as "perfect," rather than read that as it can't get any better, Yu says he looked at it as a foundation for its sequel; the start of something better than perceived perfection.

It's honestly a healthy way to look at the artistic process. I tell Yu that if someone called anything I've created "perfect," I'd surely let it go to my head; I'd get an ego about it. I'd also be too scared to create anything again. Yu, more rational and more thoughtful than I, chooses to look at it from a better angle.

SPELUNKY 2

DEVELOPER
Mossmouth, LLC

PUBLISHER
Mossmouth, LLC

RELEASE
PC
September 29, 2020
PS4
September 15, 2020
Switch
August 26, 2021
Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One
January 13, 2022

"I think I was just really excited about the idea of the further things that I wanted to do," he says. "With Spelunky 1, people had no expectations. With Spelunky 2, people are going to have a lot of expectations going into it, right? So, inevitably, you're going to disappoint people. But I felt that if people thought Spelunky 1 was a perfect game, they can keep playing that."

Make It Work

I'm the first to climb down. As scary as it was going up, it's mortifying working your way back from Munits. I feel like if I tip my weight just one degree too far, gravity will take the wheel, sending my body to an early end. In retrospect, I've spent a lot of my day thinking about dying.

Today wasn't perfect. My piece likely won't be, either. But the pigeons, the climbing, how this whole ordeal went south in ways I never could've anticipated? It made today memorable, fun, unique, and interesting. It might make my job harder in the coming weeks – a lot of good quotes got ruined by pigeons – but it also beats writing another preview round-up entry. In that case, I can buy Yu's philosophy and embrace the chaos and imperfections of life. At the very least, I got some good anecdotes. Yu seems to agree.

"This is definitely up there as far as surreal experiences go," he says as we work our way back to civilization.

The exhaustion and stress of the day wear on us as we hike the way we came; our bodies and conversations are slower than they were a few hours ago. Interview questions melt into small talk, mostly about how strange this trip has been. It was, admittedly, poorly planned. Imperfect, you might say. Or perfect in its own way. All a matter of perspective.

What does perfection mean? A few weeks ago, I thought I'd have an answer by this point. Yu made a "perfect" game. Surely he could enlighten me. I don't think he did, but I don't think that matters. I don't think perfection means any one thing so much as it means something different to each person. For you, Spelunky might be a perfect game. For Yu, it isn't. But that's okay. Nothing is actually perfect – even if people say it is. It's just a matter of embracing that fact.

"I think a lot of indie developers – especially when they're starting out – I think it's easy to think about the game you're working on as like, 'This is it. This has gotta make or break me. This has gotta be my magnum opus,'" Yu says. "It's easy to get into this cycle of working on one thing forever and ever because your skills grow as you're developing, and what you worked on a year ago may not look as good to you now as it did back then.

"I think it's important to realize that it's fine. I think that a big part of not succumbing to perfection is just thinking about things this way. It's okay if it's not perfect. It's okay if what you worked on at the beginning of the game development [cycle] is not as good as what you're working on at the end of development. You just find a way to make it work."

Again, it's all a matter of perspective. ■

ONE LAST THING

SORA'S SMASHING SUCCESS

KINGDOM HEARTS' SORA IS NO STRANGER TO CROSSOVERS, Disney worlds and interacting with Final Fantasy characters. However, we got a special treat in October when the iconic keyblade wielder was announced as the final DLC fighter coming to Smash Bros. Ultimate. In *Game Informer*'s exclusive interview with Kingdom Hearts director Tetsuya Nomura, he revealed he had some hesitation about letting the happy-go-lucky hero join the roster.

"Obviously, I was very happy that we were able to have Sora make an appearance in Smash Bros. Ultimate. Most of the feedback when Sora was [announced] for Smash Bros. Ultimate was, 'I can't believe Disney okayed for him to be in this game.' Behind the scenes, I was actually the one being very picky about his appearance in Smash Bros. Disney was the one that was like, 'Go ahead! This is a great opportunity.' I thought it would be tough to pull off because it might clash with the established lore in Kingdom Hearts and the Disney worlds, so it was an opportunity I had to consider very carefully. After seeing how happy everybody was in welcoming Sora to Smash Bros., I feel like the end result was really great."

Be sure to read our full interview with Nomura and what's in store for Kingdom Hearts IV at GameInformer.com ■

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